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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

Vol. 63, No. 2 JULY, 1956

A Jim Hatfield Novel

DEATH AT JUBILEE JUNCTION.....Jackson Cole 8
The Lone Wolf had a tall job on his hands—to track down the mysterious gang bent on wrecking the railroad

A Long Novelet

EMBERS OF WAR.....Steuart Emery 72
The Apaches were out for blood, and it would take luck and a desperate gamble to save the girl's pretty scalp

Four Short Stories

THE SILENT GUN.....Pete Curtis 50
Could a man risk his all to save the life of a friend?

HOAG'S STATION.....W. J. Reynolds 56
Up popped the devil and a very lovely lady in distress

DECISION AT PRAIRIE CITY.....Philip Morgan 64
Seldom did a man go so far wrong he couldn't come back

GUNMAN'S GUILT.....L. Edward Thompson 105
It took more than money and a fancy girl to make a man

Features

THE FRONTIER POST.....Captain Starr 6

DRUG ON THE MARKET.....W. L. Hudson 25

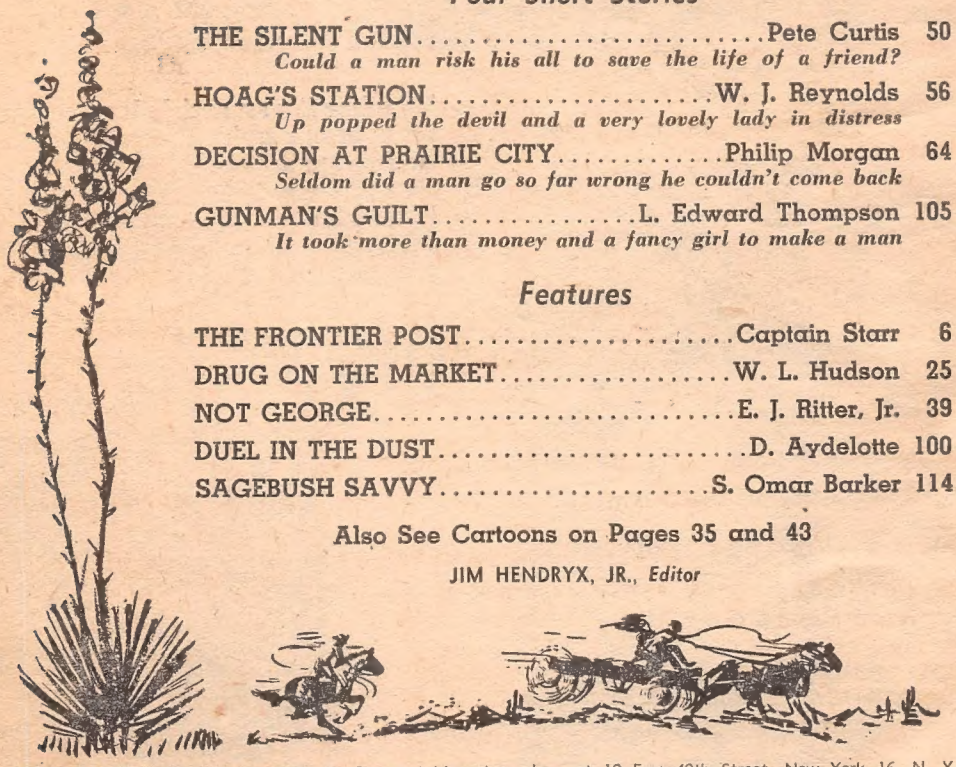
NOT GEORGE.....E. J. Ritter, Jr. 39

DUEL IN THE DUST.....D. Aydelotte 100

SAGEBUSH SAVVY.....S. Omar Barker 114

Also See Cartoons on Pages 35 and 43

JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*



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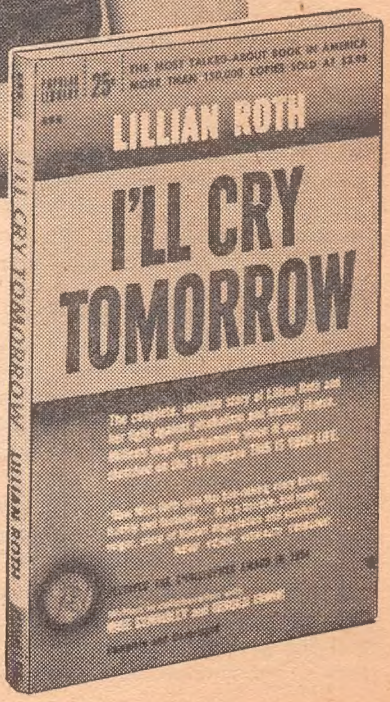
Susan Hayward, star of "I'll Cry Tomorrow"



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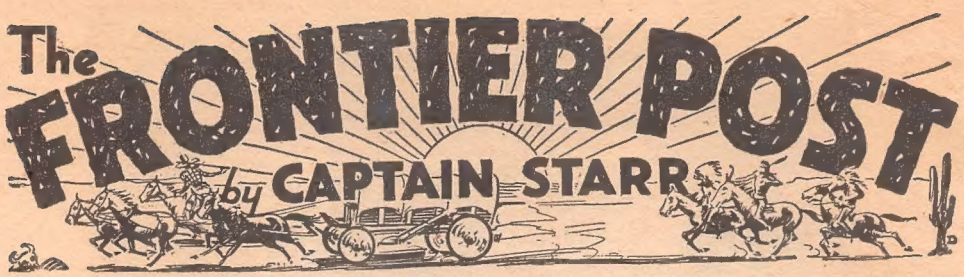


A Man to Ride The River With?

THE WESTERN gold-rush era made life for its participants an exciting experience. And one of the callings a man might have followed in those days had fewer dull moments than most of the others. Such was the profession of stagecoach driving, with its attendant hazards—rough roads, rougher weather, and still rougher holdup men.

Drivers like Billy Hamilton, Jim Miller and Curly Dan Robbins became justly famous for their exploits atop a Concord stagecoach. Another who equaled, perhaps even surpassed these men in the display of bravery and hardihood, was tough Charlie Parkhurst.

For more than thirty years Charlie piloted a Concord over routes that included the biggest mining camps in the California area. One was the Stockton-to-Mariposa run, which was noted for its dangers. From Placerville to Sacramento was another which could be hardly considered as one to take for a pleasant Sunday drive.

Over the years Charlie's reputation as a skillful and daring driver grew to large proportions. Charlie was never known to be deliberately reckless, but when a situation called for fast and forthright action, Charlie Parkhurst was right there to give it.

Charlie's reputation gained much renown in another direction, also. It was generally accepted that the day after payday Charlie was sure to be found completely without funds. Charlie was quite obviously aware of the fact that you can't take it with you. The profession being what it was, a stagecoach driver never knew just when it might be necessary to leave, so it did not seem to be a part of wisdom to let his money pile up.

Whiskey made the major contribution toward the depletion of Charlie's cash reserves. Nothing gave Charlie more real enjoyment than a determined, and usually successful effort to entirely surround the contents of a keg of whiskey, big keg or small.

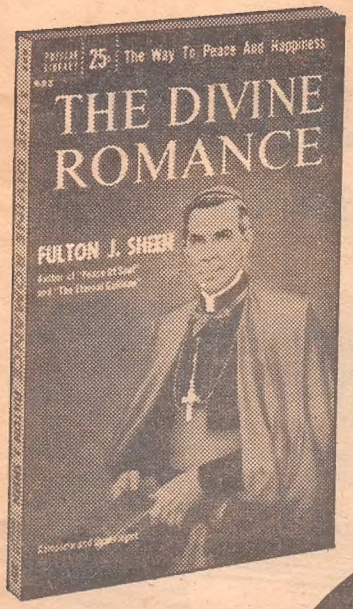
Good cigars ran whiskey a close second in the race for Charlie's esteem. The passengers were particularly voluble about the cigars. Seems that they added a certain dubious flavor to long journeys. These passengers were undoubtedly suffering from severely jolted kidneys, however, and their complaints may be dismissed as pure bias.

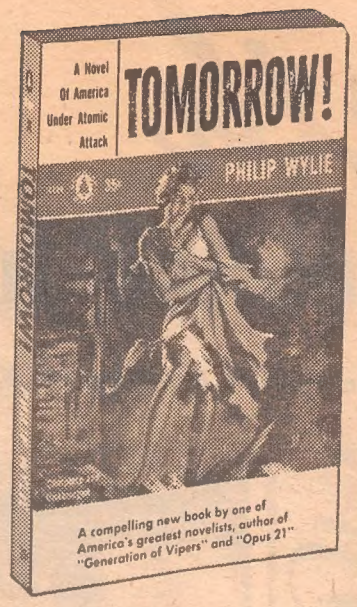
All in all, no one ever considered it necessary for Charlie to go bareheaded for any man. Charlie was four-square, rugged stuff, all wool and a yard wide.

Charlie was living in Watsonville, California when the time came for the last journey, in 1879. Suitable ceremonies were held eulogizing Charlie's accomplishments here on earth, together with the fervent hope that a good stage driver would fit in somehow up above. Following the services Charlie was buried quietly, with no hint of the repercussions and hullabaloo to follow, in the Odd Fellows cemetery.

As it happened, it was not until a few days later that the most amazing news came out about the late stage driver. The whole town was stunned by it. Men who had long bragged of Charlie's escapades walked about bewilderedly. Rank betrayal was heavy in their stomachs. The women of the town, on the other hand, suddenly acquired a superior air which did nothing to bolster the spirits of their menfolk.

According to the doctor, who came to be considered by the male population as an inordinate blabbermouth, tough old Charlie Parkhurst had been a woman! Not content with this revelation, the doctor added insult to grievous injury by further revealing that Charlie Parkhurst had at some time been a mother to boot.

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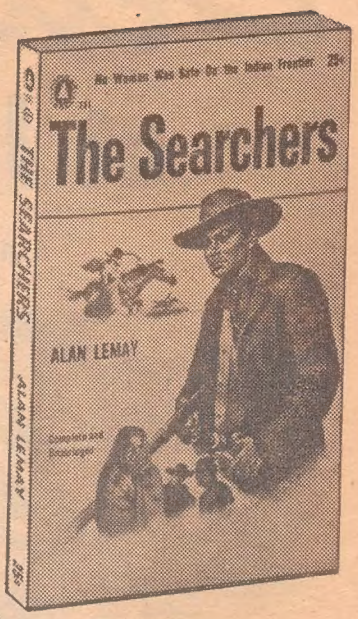

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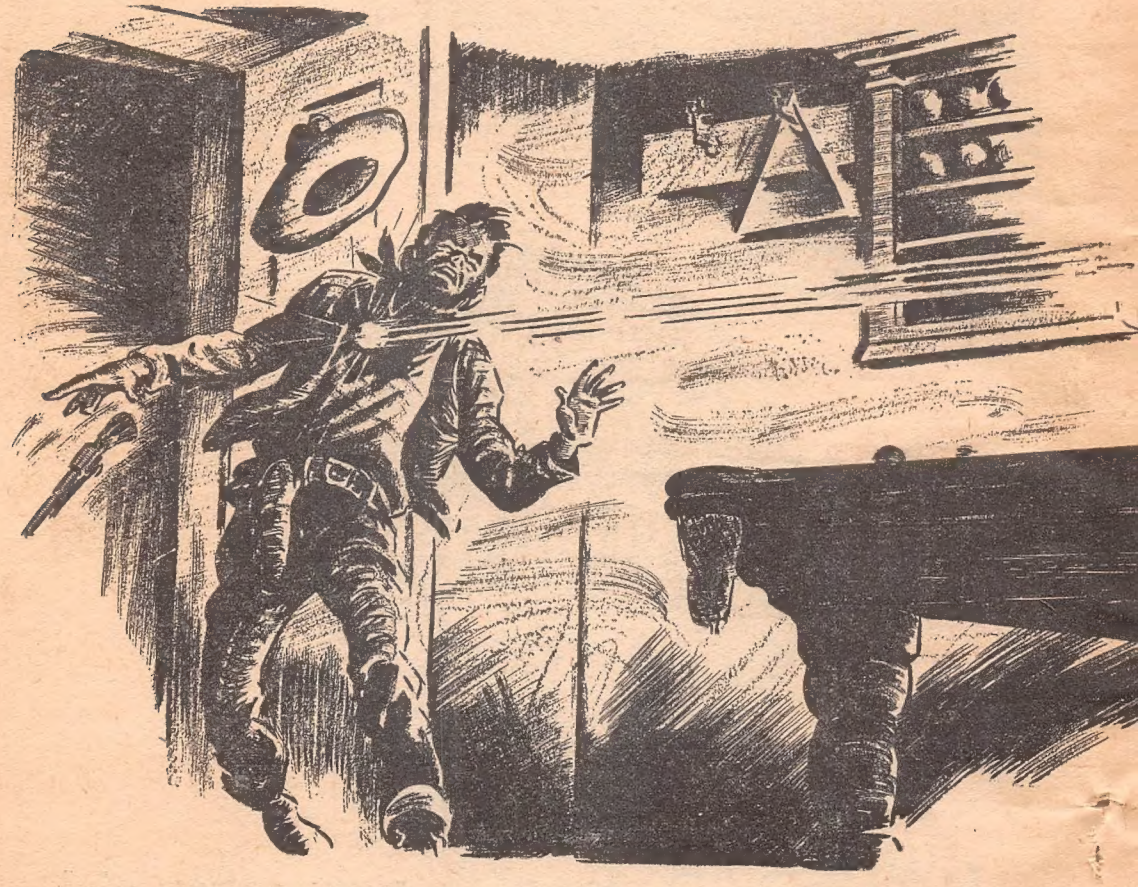
Death at Jubilee Junction

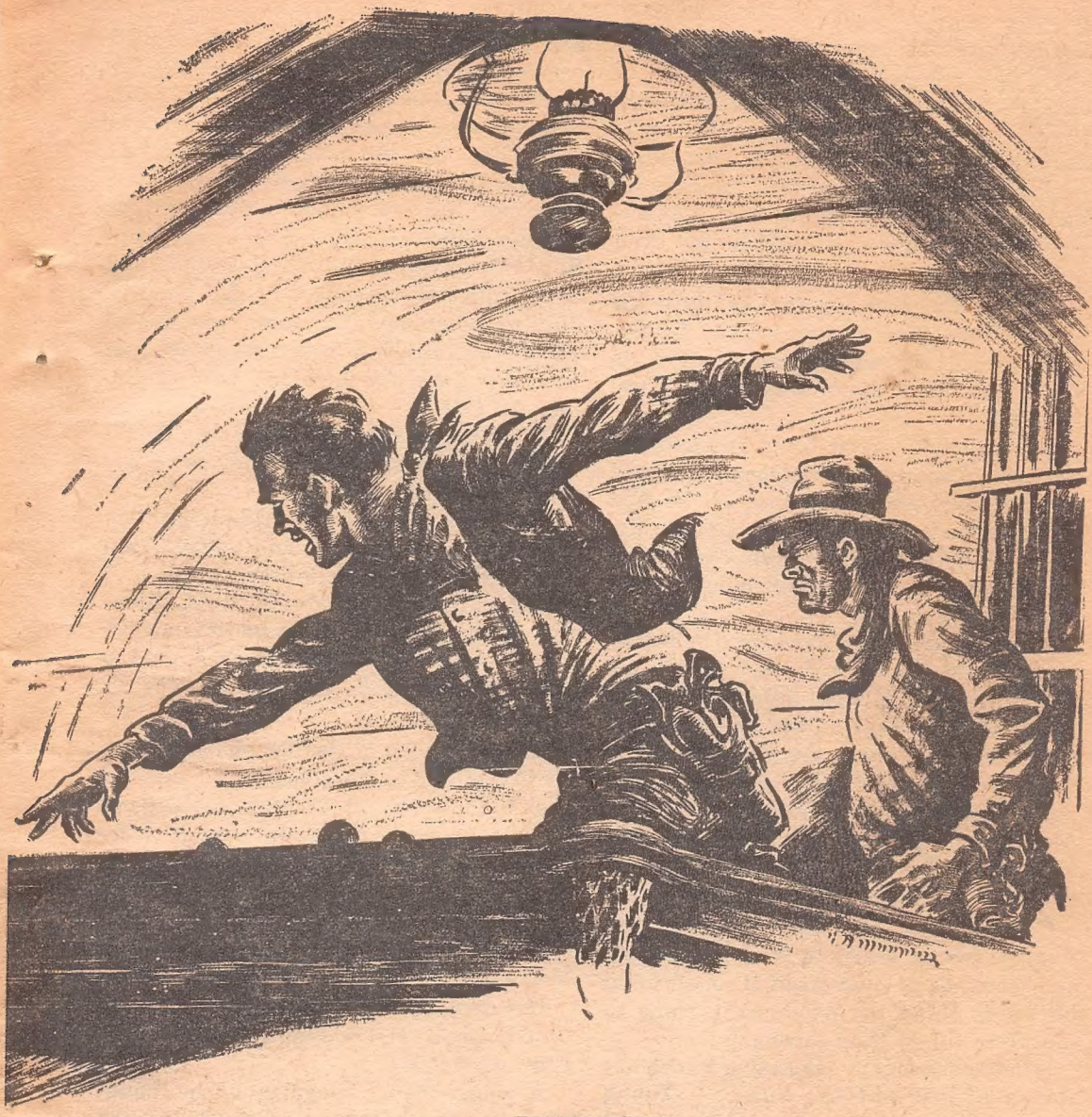
A Jim Hatfield Novel by JACKSON COLE



The Lone Wolf had a tall job on his hands—

to find and wreck the mysterious killer-gang

that was fast wrecking the Southern Pacific



CHAPTER 1

Death on the Rails

THE RISING moon aglow in the eastern sky behind him, the tall rider drew rein on a bench overlooking the lights of town. Jubilee Junction with its railroad yards and shops, the divisional headquarters of the Southern Pacific. The Mountain Division that was being plagued by train robberies, so persistent and devastating that Superintendent Gray Silloway had sent to Austin for Ranger aid.

Jim Hatfield, the famed Lone Wolf of the Rangers, who was answering that call, shifted in the leather and stroked

the neck of the great golden sorrel beneath him. Beyond the luminous haze of Jubilee, the humped mass of the Alameda Mountains shouldered the star-sewn western horizon. Hatfield let his gaze drop back to the railroad junction. Already he had noted the air of excitement and tension about the town. It could be felt even at this distance.

The big Ranger murmured gently to his mount, "Another trouble town, Goldy. And across the mountains Partlow is worse yet. But that's why we're here, *cabello.*"

Silloway had asked for a company of Rangers. Captain Bill McDowell couldn't spare a company, of course, so he had sent the one he had long ago dubbed the Lone Wolf, and knew from experience was as good as any run-of-the-mill company of lawmen.

Slanting down the slope into a rutted wagon road, Hatfield drifted the sorrel toward the settlement of Jubilee Junction. Ahead of him people on foot and on horseback were pressing in the direction of the depot and yards. Something had happened again; another holdup, no doubt. As Hatfield urged Goldy into an easy lope, folks along the street turned to stare at the towering figure on the golden horse.

Caught in a jam of humanity, the Ranger swung down to lead his mount, and snatches of conversation, confirming his guess about the excitement, came to him from the jostling throng.

"Comanche Cut . . . the same bunch . . . A regular massacre this time . . . Young Tommy Silloway . . . Slim Boley, too, I heard . . . That Abernathy and Valo!

THE last two names were familiar to Jim Hatfield. Two known outlaws, Anse Abernathy and Rip Valo, were rumored to be operating with the train robbers in this area. Hatfield had crossed their trails before now, but never when they had been wanted by the law. This trip he hoped to have grounds on which to take them.

The railroad yards were blazing with lights and swarming with townspeople and grim-faced railroad men. The crowd centered about the station, watching the tracks and the mountains to the west. Hatfield tied among broncs and wagons that filled the hitch-racks, and walked toward the lighted windows of the office building. He had gathered by now that Tommy Silloway, the super's son, and Slim Boley, young railroad detective, had been killed or wounded by the bandits. Jubilee Junction was waiting for a special work train to bring in the casualties and the news from the highland pass of Comanche Cut.

The Ranger thought somberly, That'll break old Gray Silloway. They say Gray worshiped that boy of his.

The corridors of the administration building were packed with grave-eyed men and hazed with tobacco smoke. A guard with a stubby shotgun stood before the closed door of the superintendent's office. After a brief conference, and a show of credentials the Ranger was allowed to enter.

Gray Silloway, a slender girl held gently in one great arm, stood with his broad back to the desk and the room, looking out the windows over the garish tumult of the yards. The girl's head was bowed on Gray's chest; her shoulders were shaking convulsively. Gray's silvery head was high and rigid, but stark grief was plain in every line of his face, in his very stance.

His daughter, Tommy's sister, thought Jim Hatfield, and wished he had not arrived at such a time.

A young man, annoyance on his handsome features, crossed to meet the big Ranger. "I'm Earl Mabry, assistant super," he said crisply. "Who are you, and what do you want here at such a time as this?"

Hatfield told him with quiet restraint, and Mabry's manner changed to instant and cordial warmth as he shook hands and made the lawman welcome.

"A bad time, Ranger, a terrible thing," murmured Mabry, shaking his well-groomed curly head.

"It's true then? About the two boys?"

"Boley's alive, I guess," Mabry said

dully. But they got Tommy. I'm afraid the Chief and Phyllis will never get over it." He nodded mournfuly at the silent pair by the window.

Gray Silloway turned like a man in a trance, easing his daughter into a chair and coming to greet the Ranger. "Glad you are here, Hatfield," he said brokenly, as they clasped hands. "Have a drink with me. I need one. I need a hundred. And they wouldn't do any good, either."

"Let me, Mr. Silloway," said Hatfield. Taking the bottle and glass from the man's trembling hands he poured two generous potions.

Silloway sank heavily into a leather chair and gazed blindly at the glass in his wavering fist, motioning the Ranger to a nearby seat. Behind the huge desk, Earl Mabry was trying to comfort the crumpled girl.

Silloway started to speak, but Hatfield said, "Let it go, sir. Don't try to talk now."

A faint, wan smile touched the gaunt face of the railroad official. "I couldn't, anyway. But I *am* glad you came."

They sat in silence, broken only by the dry, hushed sobbing of Phyllis Silloway and the low, soothing tones of Earl Mabry, in his attempts to console her. Evidently there was an understanding between them, Hatfield decided. A fine-looking couple, for sure.

But Jim Hatfield didn't put much stock in words, at a time like this. There weren't any words to fit such a situation. A man could convey as much sympathy without talking, if he felt it in his heart, as he could with an oration. He fell back on thought. Young Mabry was a pretty slick article. Maybe a mite too smooth. But he must be all right, if Gray Silloway accepted him as an assistant and a prospective son-in-law.

JIM HATFIELD

OUTSIDE a hoarse muted shout went up in the night.

"She's coming in! The special from the Cut's coming!"

The next hour was a nightmare for the citizens of Jubilee. The work train chugged in behind its kerosene-burning headlamp, bronze bell clanging and smoke and sparks rising from the wide funnel, and was shunted to rest on a siding. Earl Mabry wanted to clear the yard, but Silloway said, "Let the folks stay, Earl. They're friends and neighbors, here in sympathy and not because of morbid curiostiy." And the crowd *was* respectful, considerate and well-behaved, except for a few drunks who were quickly run off by the railroad men. The Silloways were highly regarded in Jubilee, and these people were sharing the grief and loss felt by Gray and Phyllis.

There were three dead besides Tommy

Silloway, a half-dozen gunshot cases, and several passengers with gashed lumped scalps from having been pistol-whipped. It had been murder in Comanche Cut this time.

"We weren't going to fight 'em," Slim Boley said. "We knew we didn't have a chance. But they started blasting at us. They were after Tommy most." He groaned and gestured with a clenched fist.

Jim Hatfield looked at the well-riddled bodies, and helped the local medico attend to the wounded. Tommy Silloway had been a nice clean-cut boy, and the Ranger felt the smolder of anger deep within himself. Phyllis collapsed completely, and was taken home in a carriage by Earl Mabry, but her father stayed on the scene, in charge of things in spite of his shattering grief.

As Hatfield assisted the doctor, he listened to various accounts and reports of the holdup. The killings had been brutal, wanton and wholly unnecessary. The outlaws had been out to get the super's son; that was obvious. And they didn't mind taking along a few others, just for sport.

"They wore masks," Slim Boley said. "But I'm pretty sure I saw Rip Valo and Anse Abernathy in the bunch."

"It couldn't have been Valo, Slim," said someone in the background. "I saw Rip right here in town tonight."

"Well, he's one of 'em anyway, no matter where he was," Slim declared. "And he's going to die with the rest of the buzzards." Slim and Tommy Silloway had grown up together, had been inseparable friends since childhood. Slim was taking Tommy's death as hard as were the boy's father and sister.

"Where do those outlaws hang out?" inquired Jim Hatfield.

"They'll probably celebrate in Partlow, before heading back into the mountains," Boley said, teeth grating on edge from the fury and sorrow that seethed inside him.

Hatfield nodded. He had suspected as much, for Partlow was notorious as a rendezvous and hangout for lawless characters. The Lone Wolf's decision to ride west for that objective, taking the road that followed South Pass through the Alamedas, was already made.

Surgical chores and interviews finished, Hatfield washed up and started for the depot rack, where he had left Goldy tethered. The crowd had diminished, though the flickering light of flares and lanterns showed the yards still thronged. Gray Silloway had finally departed in a buckboard bearing the body of his son, and the Ranger wondered if the super would be the next target of the raiders. He must have some bitter personal enemies in the outlaw crew.

Pausing to twist and light a cigarette, Hatfield wished he had some comrades from Ranger headquarters with him, men like Milt Travers and Red Bouchard and Fox Edley. Alone, he couldn't protect Gray Silloway and hunt bandits at the same time. He could count on some help from Slim Boley, but he didn't expect much from the debonair Earl Mabry, who seemed to be primarily a desk and ladies' man.

Hatfield was approaching a side track when a voice reached him from a shadowy string of freight cars at the left. "Come here, big man," it said. "You want to learn something about the robbers?" The Ranger peered into the murky darkness, clouded with smoke from an engine that was getting up steam in the yard.

HE COULDN'T see anything but a row of box cars. Warily he moved along them, away from the lights and the people. It might be a trap, but it was a poor place for a killer to make a play, with the vicinity swarming with railroad men and detectives and local law.

"Come on out," Hatfield called. "Come out and talk." His right hand caressed the butt of the Colt strapped on that thigh.

There was a dark hurtling rush of something dark from overhead, and he tried to dodge away—too late. High-heeled riding boots spiked his chest and

drove him backward and down, the breath smashed from his lungs. He landed on his back with jarring force, the attacker sprawling beside him and slashing at his head with a gun-barrel. Hatfield rolled desperately away, and came up on all fours in the ashes and cinders. The shocking impact left him dazed, shaken, panting for air.

Before he could make another move, his assailant lunged and struck him a glancing blow over the ear with the steel barrel. Stunned and breathless, Hatfield fell back beneath the driving weight of the man. Grappling in the dirt they threshed and tumbled about in a blind frenzy, the pistol lashing occasionally at the Ranger's shoulders, his own fists and elbows ripping at his opponent's face.

Once, their sweaty faces close together as they strained for the advantage, a ray of ruddy light from somewhere streaked across them, and Hatfield found himself staring into the bulging eyes and snarling, bristled features of Rip Valo.

Fighting with redoubled fury on recognizing the outlaw, Hatfield strove to tie up and pin Valo down, but the gun-barrel crashed against his skull once more. The strength seeped from the Lone Wolf's grasping arms, and Valo broke loose and rolled clear. Half-conscious and nearly helpless, the Ranger lay gasping and waiting for the hammer blow to crush his head or face—but it did not come. Dimly he heard the crunch of running boots, louder and nearer in the shadows. Crawling weakly to hands and knees he saw that Valo had fled before the oncoming trainmen and now had vanished. Shaking his head in disgust, Hatfield tried to rise.

Then rough friendly hands were helping him upright, and hoarse voices were questioning him. "Valo—jumped me," he panted, and cursing men scattered off to search for the renegade.

Hatfield was bathing his battered head at the station trough when the railroad hands came straggling back without having caught a glimpse of Rip Valo. The search was being continued throughout the town, by some of the Southern Pacific workers and townsmen, but the consensus of opinion was that Rip had reached his horse and had ridden out.

"It's all right, boys," Hatfield said. "We know for certain now that Valo's one of them, and sooner or later he'll lead us to the rest."

His head cleared at last, but still throbbing with pain, the Ranger mounted and rode Goldy to the livery stable. He couldn't start for Partlow tonight; both he and the sorrel were too much in need of rest, after a long hard day on the trail. Tomorrow would be time enough to ride over the Hump. If his head stopped aching by then.

After caring for Goldy, Hatfield checked on the Silloway residence and found it adequately guarded. Reassured on that score, he had a few drinks in the hotel barroom, helped himself at the free-lunch table, and went wearily upstairs to bed.

CHAPTER II

Pasear to Partlow

ACROSS the mountains from Jubilee, bleak and sun-blistered on the banks of the dried-up Neshobe, the settlement of Partlow had not been civilized by the coming of the Southern Pacific Railroad. It was still a hideout for wanted men, a drinking, gaming and trading place for ranchers and cowboys west of the Alamedas. Bleached structures of ragged adobe bricks, only a few of them adorned by brush *ramadas* or board awnings, squatted along the irregular streets, with scrawny cottonwoods offering sparse shade here and there.

The livery barn and the Silver Wheel Casino were the most imposing buildings of the lot, and the Sinkhole was the largest of many saloons. There was no hotel, but rooms could be rented upstairs in some of the drinking and gambling houses.

Jim Hatfield, riding unobtrusively in through the early darkness, racked his sorrel and started making the rounds in a quiet, leisurely manner. Apparently the outlaws had pulled out before his arrival. The only celebrants at present were unmistakably cowhands, to the Lone Wolf's practiced eye, wild enough in their way, but not thieves and killers.

For all his shy reticence and his plain hard-worn range garb, Jim Hatfield stood out from the crowd as he always did, and attracted notice. Standing four inches above the six-foot mark and moving with lazy ease and grace, he was a striking figure in any surroundings, his hair crisply black under the dusty hat, his eyes smoky-green in a lean bronzed hawk-face. He had a hard somber aspect until he smiled, when his rugged features and grave eyes were brightened with a charm that was almost boyish.

In the Silver Wheel the proprietor, Harry Nourse, welcomed him with Old World dignity and courtesy, now abandoned in a new world, and a newer West, and stood him the first drink. A pale and cadaverous man of tarnished elegance, Nourse dressed in rusty black and yellowed white, employed a jeweled snuff box and a gold toothpick, and looked upon the world with a tired, tolerant gaze that was mildly ironical and mocking.

They chatted of diverse things before Nourse remarked casually, "The train robbers are no longer with us, Mr. Jimson," using the name Hatfield had given him.

Hatfield gave him a slow smile. "Am I supposed to be interested in train robbers?"

"I thought you might have ideas about joining up with them. It pays better than punching cows—or wearing a town marshal's star."

"Reckon I'll stick to working cattle."

"Mill Iron's in town tonight. Howard Mabry might put you on. He runs the biggest spread in this Neshobe country."

"Mabry?" repeated Hatfield. "Any relation to Earl Mabry at Jubilee Junction?"

"Big brother," Harry Nourse said. "A big man in these parts. And he has a foreman about your size, name of Torquay. Turk'll want to fight you the minute he sees you, Jimson. He doesn't find many men big enough physically to stand up against him."

Hatfield shrugged broad shoulders. "I'm not hunting a fight here."

Nourse's skeletal smile was all irony then. "I didn't mean to frighten you, Mr. Jimson." He dipped snuff daintily from the ornate box, and was serenely chewing on his gold toothpick when Hatfield left.

In the Sinkhole Saloon the owner, Yoke Freeman stood aloof and sullen, until Hatfield introduced himself as Jimson and bought the saloon owner a drink. Massive in a gaudy yellow-and-purple checked shirt, Freeman had a beefy red face lumped with chewing tobacco and a walrus mustache from which a cigar jutted. He removed the cigar when drinking, but left the cud in his florid cheek.

"I don't give a continental copper if they rob every damn train the Southern Pacific runs," Freeman declared. "This was good country until the railroad come. But the boys don't bother to rob 'em all. They just hit 'em when the express car is loaded rich and ripe."

HATFIELD asked, surprised at the blunt frankness of the saloonkeeper, "You don't hold with murder, do you?"

"Murder? Who says it was murder?" Freeman scoffed. "Young Silloway was a railroad dick, wasn't he? His old man should of known better than to put him on that run, if he wanted to keep the kid alive. Naw, I don't hold with murder, mister. But it's not murder when an outlaw shoots a lawman, in the line of business."

He guffawed at his own wit, and the Ranger wondered if this fat man was as simple and stupid as he pretended. It could be an act.

"Where'll I find Howard Mabry?" Hatfield inquired.

"Pool room, most likely," Yoke Freeman said, spitting contemptuously. "He

don't drink or gamble or go to the cribs, but he sure likes to shoot pool. For a good cowman Howard's damn near as much of a dude as that fancy pants kid brother of his over at the Junction."

In the smoke-shrouded pool hall Jim Hatfield came upon the shirt-sleeved rancher, as rough and blocky as his brother Earl was polished and slim, concentrating with deadly intentness on beating a house man. When the house man missed a break shot, Howard Mabry cleaned the table with swift mechanical precision to run out and win the game.

Glowing with self-satisfaction and crowing happily over his vanquished opponent, Mabry racked his cue and gulped a bottle of soda pop. The bottle empty, he noticed then the interest of the tall stranger for the first time, and his craggy weather-beaten features hardened.

"You looking for me maybe?" he demanded flatly, squaring his solid bulk before Hatfield.

"Man told me I might get work with you, Mr. Mabry."

Howard Mabry measured him coldly. "You might. Turk'd be glad to take on a hand as big as you." He laughed with an abrupt return of good humor. "Somebody he could lick every day without being ashamed of himself."

Hatfield grinned and shook his head. "Don't know as I want a job that bad."

"Aw, you better take it. Been kind of dull and slow on the Mill Iron lately. New blood could liven things up a little. Torquay won't hurt you—much. You might even lick the Turk. You're big enough. That'd really be something to see."

"Well, I don't know—" Leaning against the table, Hatfield was idly rolling ivory balls on the velvet surface beneath his great right palm.

"Man your size oughtn't to be scared of anything," Howard Mabry protested. "You can stand Turkey off with them guns—if you have to. He's not much with a Colt."

Torquay stood there, high and broad, with a sawed-off shotgun lined on Jim

A back door opened and Hatfield felt the familiar cold prickling anticipation of danger. Peering through layers of blue smoke, he saw the blurred form of a man tensed stiffly in that doorway, and it looked in the vague light like Rip Valo. And when the man's right hand clawed and moved to his holster, Hateld knew it *was* Valo, drawing for the kill.

The Lone Wolf's fingers tightened on the smooth ivory ball, he swiveled from the table, and threw with a fluid lashing motion of his long right arm. That ball streaked swiftly through the smoky lamplight. Valo's gun was half cleared when the pool ball smashed his right shoulder and spun him twisting back against the door casing. The pistol clattered to the planks and Rip Valo sagged there, groaning, his right arm dangling limply from a numbed shoulder, shocked fear widening his eyes and hollowing his stubbled face.

Then Hatfield had a Colt lined on him, but Howard Mabry waved the weapon down and stepped between them, pacing toward Valo.

"What you drawing on him for, you fool?" the rancher demanded disgustedly. "Get out of here and hit for the ranch. Turk'll pay you off, and you can pick up your gear and light out. Be gone before I get back, Valo. I'm sick and tired of your drunken trouble-making."

"My shoulder's busted, Boss," moaned Valo, grimacing with anguish.

"It should be your head," Howard Mabry said. "Go on—get out."

HALF-SOBBING, Valo stooped to pick up the pistol with his left hand, and stumbled out through the back door, which someone slammed shut behind him.

"Sorry, stranger." Mabry turned to the Ranger. "That man's crazy."

"He was riding for you?"

The rancher nodded. "One of my mistakes. I don't make too many. You want that job or not? I'll be needing another hand now."

"Yeah, I'll take it," Hatfield agreed thoughtfully. If Valo had been working for the Mill Iron, there might be some more of the train robbers on the pay-roll. Anse Abernathy, for one. It was worth looking into, at any rate, and it would give the Ranger a legtimate excuse for hanging around this Neshobe country. "Jimson's the name," he added, in response to Howard Mabry's query.

"You play pool, Jimson?"

"Not so good," Hatfield admitted. "Kind of out of practice."

"Well, you can't be any worse than these other suckers," Howard Mabry chuckled. "Come on, I want one more game before I head for home. If you shoot them balls like you throw 'em, Jimson, you ought to make it fairly interesting for me."

If Valo has any fellow outlaws at the Mill Iron, he'll tip them off on my identity as a Ranger, reflected Hateld, as he selected and chalked up a cue. And I'll be on the spot for sure when I get to that layout. But that's a chance I'll have to risk, of course. Purely routine for a Texas Ranger.

CHAPTER III

Mill Iron Monster

IT WAS late that night when the Mill Iron crew arrived at the ranch, Howard Mabry and Jim Hatfield riding at the head of a half-dozen cowboys. As they unsaddled, turned out their horses, and hung their gear in the tack shed, a gimp-legged hostler told Howard that Rip Valo had come and gone, without his pay because Turk Torquay was away. Anse Abernathy had ridden off with Rip.

"Good riddance to them both," growled Mabry. "Don't know why I ever hired them two, in the first place. Never did like the looks of 'em . . . What was between you and Valo anyway, Jimson?"

"I don't know of anything," Hatfield drawled. "Can't seem to place the man, but he sure didn't like the looks of me,

for some reason."

"It figures that Anse and Rip have been riding the owlhoot here and there. Could be Valo took you for a lawman, Jimson."

"Could be," assented Hatfield.

"Well, are you?" asked Howard Mabry.

Hatfield laughed softly. "If I am, I'm not earning my pay."

Mabry chortled and clapped him on the back. "Come in the house and get cleaned up, and we'll have a bit to eat. I feel like talking to somebody. You can bunk in there tonight, if you want to. Nothing fancy, but some better than the bunkhouse."

Howard Mabry had taken a liking to Hatfield, and the Ranger discovered that he liked the cattleman better than he did his more physically personable younger brother. Howard was crude and unpretentious, with a ruthless driving force in him, but he seemed to be regular, honest, and friendly beneath the surface bluster.

The following day, with Torquay still absent, Hatfield spent in riding the range with Howard Mabry, on a sort of informal tour of inspection. The rancher was rightfully proud of his Mill Iron, the well-equipped buildings and corrals and the fine herds of cattle and horses. The Alameda outlaws hadn't bothered him much; it was quicker and easier to rob trains. They had a mountain hideout somewhere north of Comanche Cut, it was estimated, but no one had been able to locate it as yet.

"Abernathy and Valo probably rode that way," Howard said musingly. "But they'll be back to collect their pay. Maybe I'll turn the Turk loose on 'em then—unless you want them yourself, Jimson?"

"I don't want them for anything," Hatfield said. "Not until Valo makes another play for me anyway."

When they got back to the ranch on the Neshobe, the sun was low and red in the west, the shadows long and lavender on the broken plains. Howard Mabry left Jimson to unsaddle the horses, and went directly to the adobe-block ranch house. A dark-skinned giant with incongrous red-dish hair stepped from the stable as Hatfield lugged the saddle gear toward the racks, and the Ranger knew at once he must be the ramrod, Torquay.

"You're as big as they say you were," Torquay declared, with soft mockery. "My size, give and take a few pounds. A pleasure to have you here, Jimson—that's the name you're going under, I take it? And real friendly with the boss, too?"

Strange eagle eyes glowed in the foreman's bold dark face, and the flash of his teeth was weirdly white. A monster of many mixed bloods, the auburn hair shining unnaturally above the darkness of the features, the voice liquid and musical, soft as a woman's.

Hatfield kept silent, holding the saddles, but with icy flickers brushing his backbone.

"Maybe you want to be top man here, mistah?" suggested Torquay.

"I just took a riding job here, that's all."

"Cowhands don't move into the big house with the boss, Jimmy."

"Ask Howard about that," Hatfield said. "It was his idea."

"Howard don't have to account to me." Torquay smiled. "*You* do."

"What do you want from me?"

"Get rid of that gear, and we'll see."

HATFIELD moved into the shed and slung the saddles, first Howard's and then his own, onto empty racks, and suddenly Torquay was beside him, motioning at the Ranger's saddle and saying, "That's my peg, boy."

"I don't see your name on it."

"You don't have to see it. I'm telling you about it." With a lightning movement the big breed reached up, ripped off the saddle and flung it into the filth of the yard.

"Pick that up," Hatfield said, shifting away and poised to draw. "And clean it off real good."

"I'm not wearing a pistol," Torquay drawled, in gentle protest. "No hand with a gun. Drop your belt, feller, and then tell me to do it."

Hatfield gestured impatiently, trying to contain his rising rage. "This is childish. What's the matter with you, man?"

"Maybe I got a childish mind. Maybe I'm not as smart as you and Howard and the likes. Get rid of them guns, Jimmy. You're not scared to fight with your hands, are you?"

Hatfield sighed, unhitched his double-holstered harness, and draped it over a rack. Perhaps Torquay was mixed up with the outlaws, and had got the word from Valo to do a job on this new rider. According to all accounts, Turk had been known to kill and cripple men with his naked hands. He looked capable of it all right.

Fortunately the business with the saddle had fired Hatfield to a fighting pitch. He stepped into the shadowy yard to face the foreman, and men came running from the barn and sheds and bunkhouse to watch the battle of giants.

Torquay came in a rush, moving with the ease and speed of a middleweight, and Hatfield stabbed sharply, jarring him to a halt, holding him off momentarily. Then Turk broke through with crushing, numbing punches, and Hatfield felt himself smashed and driven backward until corral rails were grinding his shoulders, spine and hips. The foreman seemed to have a dozen hands, every one lethal, and the Ranger could not tie him up or hurl him off. With his man pinned to the bars, Turk was inflicting savage punishment with fist, elbow and knee.

Jolted blind and sick, choking on his own blood, Hatfield summoned all his strength for an explosive burst that flung Torquay backward and broke Hatfield himself loose. Turk came back tigerlike, but his opponent slipped aside and hooked the red head as it bobbed past. Torquay reeled against the corral, whirling off almost instantly, but Hatfield caught him left and right as he came around. The dark face was crimsoned and dripping now. Turk lowered his head and lunged in to grapple at close range. The Ranger couldn't break that iron grip. With irresistible force Torquay bore him backward into a rolling threshing welter on the earth. The dust swirled up around their locked and writhing forms.

Broken apart at last by the violence of their efforts, they clambered upright and circled warily, faces dripping blood onto their blackened and shredded shirts, chests heaving painfully and arms grown too heavy to raise and strike. Cotton clogged Jim Hatfield's throat, and there wasn't enough air left in the world to breathe. Exhaustion dulled his vision, and queer flares flickered behind his aching eyes. Sweat soaked his tattered, dirty clothing, until it clung damp and heavy, weighting him down. He had never encountered greater power, but Turk's stamina seemed to be waning along with the Ranger's now.

They met, swapped punches that had litle snap left in them, and then Hatfield saw an opening and from somewhere gathered the energy to throw one last solid shot. It struck with a sodden smash, spattering blood and sweat, rocking that fiery head far back. Beaten backward in a long stagger, Torquay tripped over the saddle he had tossed onto the ground and sprawled flat on his back in the barnyard dirt. Hatfield was moving in, jack-kneed and wavering, when Howard Mabry came through the circle of spectators, shouting:

"That's enough! Hold it right there, Jimson! You two idiots want to kill each other?"

"My saddle," Hatfield panted, pointing with a raw-knuckled hand. "He—threw it out. I don't know—"

"Get Turk to the bunkhouse," Howard commanded the watching hands. "You, Pogel, clean up that saddle, and make it shine. . . Jimson, are you all right?"

THE Ranger nodded heavily. "I'll live—I guess." He staggered to the nearest horse trough, and ducked deeply into the water.

"I can walk," Turk Torquay was saying. "Get your hands off me. I'm not hurt. Where's Jimson? Get away, I don't need no help . . . Where is that man? I haven't begun to fight yet."

"You're all through fighting for tonight, Turk," said Howard Mabry, kindly. "Go along with the boys and get washed up."

"He's pretty good, that Jimson," panted Turk. "But he's not that good. I've still got plenty left—plenty."

"Sure you have, Turk," agreed Howard. "And so has Jimson. Go on along and get fixed up now. That's an order, Turk. And there'll be no more fighting with Jimson either. That's another order."

Torquay stumbled off, grumbling and spitting blood in the midst of the hushed cowboys, and Hatfield went on dipping and bathing his throbbing head and torn face and hands in the water trough. Howard Mabry invited him into the big house, but he declined and waved the rancher away. Someone brought Hatfield a clean towel, and he dimly recognized Pogel, the little gimp-legged hostler.

"I'll clean up your rig, Jimson, make it good as new," Pogel promised, adding in a whisper, "I'm glad you whupped him, too. First time that red-headed breed ever got licked."

Hatfield thanked him and resumed his splashing in the trough. Outside or in, he couldn't seem to get enough water to soothe and satisfy his outraged being . . .

Some time later the cook beat his iron triangle and yelled, "Come and get it!" from the cook shack, but Hatfield had no desire for food. With his guns buckled on and the wet towel in his hand, he wandered off into the maze of corrals, wanting only to be alone and rest, away from everyone. Maybe later he'd feel like drinking whisky and eating some grub, but not right now. It would be too much of an effort.

He came to a stockade type corral with a ladder leading up to an awninged platform built across one corner, a vantage point from which Howard Mabry and his guests sometimes watched Mill Iron riders break wild mustangs. Hatfield climbed the rungs and stretched out on the boards with a long sigh of relief. The breaking pen was a black pool of stillness below him. Empty, he thought, not that it mattered. He was so beat up and spent that nothing mattered a great deal. He just wanted to sink into oblivion and rest.

He slept, although it was more like a drugged stupor than sleep. Once it seemed that someone was calling him: "Jimson, Jimson, where are you? Are you all right, Jimson? . . ." First he thought it was Howard, then he knew it was Pogel, but he didn't rouse up enough to respond. It was more like a dream than reality. Later the voice sounded again, with real alarm in it, "Not in that pen with El Diablo!" The Ranger wondered, half-conscious, what that meant, recalling vaguely that Howard had mentioned a wild horse named El Diablo which nobody had been able to tame. Then he sank into the depths once more.

The next time he awoke with a jerk, snatched rudely from slumber by rough hands tearing at him, heaving and rolling his body. He was catapulted into space, flying through the dark air as if in a nightmare of falling from a vast height, but suddenly knew he was awake and that this was real. Toppling earthward from the platform, he caught an upside down glimpse of an ugly whiskered face in the moonbeams—Rip Valo again. Then the ground smashed him, beating the breath from his lungs and the light from his brain, and the night was filled all at once with the thunder of hoofbeats, so deafeningly close that they shook the earth. And he was on the corral floor, penned in with a wild bronc, a killer bent on stomping him to death!

Regaining his senses with a supreme effort of will, Hatfield flung himself rolling and scrambling away from the bucking, snorting beast, but the horse came charging after him. Gripping the timbers of the stockade the Ranger clawed his way erect, but there was no way of climbing the close-set uprights, no escape unless he could find the gate or the inside ladder.

NOW the mustang had overrun him and was wheeling back, trumpeting in fury and rearing to strike with fore-

feet. Hatfield had turned to flee when a thrashing leg caught his shoulder and knocked him spinning into the wall and down in the boiling dust. He got up and ran the other way, grabbing for his guns, but the holsters were empty. The bronc stormed after him. It was just a question of time for Hatfield couldn't locate the ladder or the gate . . . The horse rammed into him, and he went tumbling end over end.

He scrabbled upright, choked and gagging with dirt, and turned in utter desperation to meet the oncoming animal. Perhaps he could dodge the charge, clutch the mane, and swing aboard. A long, thin chance, but about the last one for him.

El Diablo was coming in for the kill now, bugling and pawing the ground, stalking his prey with more care and deliberation. Hatfield set himself for a final effort.

The horse started his drive, and a rope snaked down from the stockade wall and settled about his neck. Rearing and screaming in thwarted rage, the bronc bucked and fought the rope, but Turk Torquay who had cast the loop dropped into the pen and wound his lariat around the snubbing post.

Giving up straining and choking himself, El Diablo charged at the man by the post, but Turk flipped an underhanded loop with a second rope to forefoot the brute and bring him crashing into the dust.

The gate opened and Hatfield and Torquay walked out, while other men entered the corral to handle the trussed, floundering bronc. A canteen was proffered, and Hatfield drank greedily, then turned to the foreman.

"I'm obliged, Turk. I was about done in there."

Nothing, Jimson," said Torquay, in that odd silken voice of his. "Thank Pogey. He called us out."

"It was Valo and Abernathy," said Pogel. "I spotted 'em skulking around back here, and I went after Turk and the boys."

"I'm grateful, Poge," said Hatfield, with simple sincerity, using the nickname by which the crew called the hostler. "Where did those two go?"

"Lit out for the mountains again, I reckon," Pogel said, busily cleaning Hatfield's pistols which had been recovered from the pen. Here's your irons, Jimson."

"Thanks again, Poge. I think I'll light out after 'em. I'm getting a little tired of that Valo."

"You can't go tonight," said Torquay. "Haven't you had enough for one evening?"

"I'll be all right after I wash up and change my clothes," Hatfield said. "Thanks to you and Poge."

Turk smiled wryly. "You're tougher'n I am then, mistah. I'm ready for the bunk, and I may not get up till noon tomorrow."

"Wait till morning, and I'll ride a piece with you," Pogel offered shyly. "I got a notion where them hombres head for, and I'll show you the way."

"That's probably a good idea, Poge," admitted Hatfield, after some consideration. "Reckon I need a night's sleep more than I realize. It's been kind of a strenuous evening, at that."

"You put it real mild-like," murmured Torquay, with a crooked smile.

CHAPTER IV

Angel of the Alamedas

ON THE trail in the morning, Pogel picked up the trace of Abernathy and Valo and, with Jim Hatfield, followed it almost due east into the rising sun and toward the Alameda Mountains. Poge had shod the ponies the outlaws were riding, and knew their prints. Quickly the Ranger committed them to memory himself.

"No real need of reading sign, though," said the hostler. "About twenty miles out is a trading post in the foothills run by Pedro Ibenez. Most likely they stayed

there last night, and will be riding on for the outlaw camp today. I knew them two was running with the wild bunch. Tried to tell Howard, but he wouldn't fire 'em."

"He fired Valo fast enough the other night in Partlow," Hatfield said thoughtfully.

"Well, Howard was getting fed up with Rip—and Anse, too, I reckon. But it took him quite awhile. Howard's always willing to give a man the benefit of the doubt, as they say, but once he makes up his mind—that's it. As final as a forty-four slug between the eyes."

"Anybody else on the Mill Iron mixed up with the bandits, Poge?"

"Not that I can figure. I'd swear by the rest of the boys."

"How about Torquay?"

"Not him—not Turk." Pogel spat tobacco juice, to emphasize his denial. "There's things about Turk I don't love, but he is as honest and straight as Howard himself."

Hatfield nodded solemnly. "I'm inclined to agree with you, Pogey. Turk just likes to fight with his hands. . . . What about this Mex trading post?"

"Ibenez is a merchant who steals without using a gun—I know he deals with the outlaws, but that don't make him one of 'em. And wait until you see that niece of his, Angela. She's purely beautiful."

"Does she deal with the robbers, too?"

"Not any more," said Pogel. "She had a handsome young *caballero* riding with that outfit, but he got killed awhile back. Other bucks have tried to move in, but Angela is not having any. . . . At least, that's how I read it."

"She fond of Uncle Pedro?" asked Hatfield, as they jogged on into the glare of the morning sun.

"Not especially, I reckon. But Pedro needs the girl—makes a regular slave out of her. Angela's got relatives in Partlow she'd like to go and live with, but Pedro keeps her to tend the store and cook and clean for him."

"Some life for a beautiful young señorita."

"You said something then," growled Pogel. "If I was twenty-odd years younger, I'd take her out of that place myself."

"Valo and Abernathy pester her much?"

"You know right well they do. But Angela wouldn't spit on 'em."

Hatfield smiled, and changed the subject. "Howard wasn't too happy about my riding out this morning, Poge."

Pogel snorted. "You can't blame him. Howard thought he'd hired himself a top-hand, then loses him on the second day."

"But I promised I'd come back."

Pogel shook his grizzled head. "Not too many outsiders ever ride into the Alamedas and come back out—except wrapped in blankets."

"I won't try to take all the train robbers," Hatfield said. "I just want Valo and his pardner."

"That's not trouble enough?" Pogel shifted his slat-thin body in the saddle, to ease his bad leg. "Them two are poison mean, Jimson."

"Wonder what they were doing back on the Mill Iron last night?"

"Looks to me like they come back to get their pay, and decided to get you instead. Maybe saw the fight and laid low until they could get a crack at you alone. Wanted to make it look accidental."

Hatfield mused, because they know I'm a Ranger. And they don't want a crew of Rangers out here to avenge the shooting of Cap'n Bill McDowell's Lone Wolf.

THE sun was soaring near its midday zenith when they reached the Ibenez trading post in the foothills, with the Alameda Range looming close and lofty on the eastern skyline. Pedro Ibenez, enormously fat and superficially smiling and jovial, was not really glad to see them, the Ranger decided. But Angela's lovely features lighted up at the sight of Pogel, and her dark eyes seemed to show approval of Hatfield.

She served them a dinner of frijoles and tortillas, exquisitely flavored, while her uncle was waiting on some mountain men in the store. Abernathy and Valo had been there, as Pogel had anticipated,

sleeping in the bunk shack that Pedro kept for guests, and starting on for the mountains less than an hour before. Angela's eyes flashed fire as she spoke of their visit. It was plain that she loathed them, and all their kind.

"The only men I see any more, Pogey," she said sorrowfully, with a faint intriguing accent, "are thieves and scoundrels and half-savage mountain men. Except when you come—you or Slim Boley. Have you any news of Slim?"

Pogel shook his gray head, but Hatfield said he had seen Slim in Jubilee Junction after the last train robbery, and that the boy had not been hurt.

"I am happy to hear that, señor," Angela said. "I heard the *bandidos* boasting about killing poor Tommy Silloway and others, and I was very afraid for Slim Boley."

"Slim's a fine lad," Pogel said. "Tommy was, too. . . . I wish some kind of law would move in and wipe out that bunch of buzzards. They're going to put the Southern Pacific out of business if they keep on."

After eating they found the fresh hoofprints of the ponies Valo and Abernathy were riding, and trailed them eastward over a steadily rising terrain, with the brush and scrubby trees giving way to boulders and real timber as they climbed.

They'll lead us to the hideout, Hatfield thought, and then I can start formulating plans and begin to operate. It shouldn't be difficult to raise a strong posse in Jubilee, where the people are worked up over that last murderous raid on the railroad. And Slim Boley will make a good lieutenant.

"I guess the señorita kind of favors young Boley, Poge," said the Ranger.

"They make a nice couple, that lanky, tow-headed gringo and the dark sweet Mex gal," Pogel remarked. "But they don't get much chance together."

"Maybe they will some time, Poge," murmured Hatfield.

They were ascending a narrow wooded canyon, with the Alameda peaks towering overhead when rifle shots blasted from the trees at the upper end. The Ranger heard the slugs strike, saw Pogel jerk and buckle in the saddle. The little hostler twisted toward his companion, death already glazing his stricken eyes and draining his thin gray-stubbled face, and Hatfield tried to reach his swaying body. Pogel had clawed out his carbine when the bronc bucked him off, before Hatfield was close enough to catch him. The Ranger thought Poge was dead when he hit the ground, still gripping his Winchester.

Fury flared up in Jim Hatfield, scorching away all caution and judgment and reason. He sent Goldy rocketing forward in a headlong run up the canyon. The two rifles kept blazing at him, the reports echoing from wall to wall, but the very unexpectedness and audacity of the Ranger's charge seemed to throw off the outlaw's aim. The bullets were kicking up dirt and stone chips, or clipping twigs and leaves as they breezed past on either side, and the splendid sorrel was gaining speed with every tremendous stride.

APPARENTLY breaking and running before this reckless drive, the bandit rifles were stilled when Hatfield glimpsed a brush-obscured reata strung low across the path. He had barely time to kick off the stirrups before Goldy tripped and fell while going at top speed, pitching his rider into the air and rolling over and over in the billowing dirt.

The earth slammed Hatfield with wrenching force, and something crushed the top of his skull. He felt the life leave his body in a winged rush. This was the end! He had lost his fool head and got Goldy and himself killed in this mountain wilderness and nobody outside the Alamedas would ever know what had happened to Jim Hatfield and his famous golden stallion.

Then everything dissolved into blackness, deep and still and bottomless. . . .

Ages later, it seemed, he came to, slow and gradual, like a half-drowned swimmer emerging at last from vast watery depths, and was astounded to find himself alive

and partly conscious, at least. A cool, damp cloth was on his brow, and his head was softly pillowed on a feminine lap. He opened his eyes and saw Angela's delicate vivid face above him, and after an interval dared to try his voice:

"How—did—you—get here?"

"I rode after you," she said. "I was afraid of something like this."

"What about—Abernathy and Valo?" Above her dark head he saw that the sky was dimming, and realized he had been out for hours.

"They're gone. We drove them off."

"*We?*"

"Pogey and I."

"But I thought—Poge was dead."

Angela winced. "He is now. He was dying—then. But he stayed alive long enough to hold them off. With not much help from me. . . . They came back to finish you, but Pogey opened fire and drove them off into the woods."

"Good old Poge," breathed Hatfield, then stiffened. "And my horse—dead, too?"

She smiled faintly. "No, the sorrel is all right. He has been standing guard over us all afternoon."

Hatfield eyed her with dull wonder. "I sure—owe you—a lot."

"You don't, really," Angela murmured. "But if you want to repay me, all you have to do is take me with you. Away from here."

"Gladly. But I have to find the bandit camp up above."

"I can take you right to it. You are a lawman, then—a Ranger, perhaps. Before Pogey died he told me that he thought you were."

"Yes, I'm a Ranger."

Hatfield stirred experimentally, and raised his head with extreme care. The pain was blinding at first, but it soon diminished. "You must be cramped and tired, Angela," he said, aware of her prolonged ordeal here. "Got to get up, move around—if I can."

In a few minutes Hatfield was up and pacing about to limber his bruised muscles and joints, restore circulation, and regain his equilibrium. He was delighted and relieved to find Goldy uninjured, beyond abrasions and scratches, but he stood for a long time in silent grief over the dead shrunken form of the little hostler Pogel.

"The bronc will carry Poge back to the Mill Iron," he thought. "I'd rather have him buried there, than out here in the hills."

Tenderly he wrapped Pogel's body in a blanket and lashed it securely across his saddle. Scribbling a note to Howard Mabry, he fixed it beneath the rope:

> VALO AND ABERNATHY DID THIS. I AM STILL ON THEIR TRAIL.—JIMSON.

Then he slapped the pony's flank to start him back into the setting sun, homeward.

"We can ride until dark, Jim," said Angela. "I know the way well. And there's a cabin where we can stop in when night comes."

She smiled shyly, her cheeks coloring prettily. "I don't suppose it is quite proper, but I know you are a gentleman, Señor Jimson."

"Of the Old School, Angela," he assured her, with a gallant bow. "And Goldy's a good chaperone anyway. . . . When will we reach the train robbers' hideout?"

SHE told him confidently, "By noon tomorrow—maybe earlier. But you won't be able to ride in there after those two killers." That would be suicide."

"I have no intention of committing suicide," Hatfield said. "Although I seemed bent on it this afternoon, when they shot Poge out of his saddle. I just want to spot the location, so I can come back with a posse."

"Then you will ride to Jubilee Junction?"

"Yes. And you?"

"I will go to Partlow," said Angela. "I have folks to stay with there. And you can tell Slim Boley where I've gone, if you don't mind."

CHAPTER V

Mountain Hideout

PERCHED high on the rimrock under a noonday sun, Jim Hatfield scanned the sunken valley through his field-glasses while Angela Ibenez rested at his side. Rip Valo and Anse Abernathy, the Ranger discovered, were in the camp below, but he could not identify any of the other men there. Rip and Anse seemed to be in command, yet it didn't seem credible that they could be the real leaders of this band. They weren't men of high enough caliber to run such an organization.

The valley ran north and south, on the same axis as the Alameda Range, watered by a stream that had channeled the only two entrances at the north and south ends of the natural hidden stronghold. There were tents and lean-to shanties, and brush and pole corrals on the bottomland, almost obscured by the trees that shaded the creek. The outlaws lazed around in luxurious ease, between their strikes at the trains of the Southern Pacific.

"Let me try them again, señor," Angela said, reaching out with childlike eagerness as Hatfield started to set the glasses aside and resume work on the map he was sketching in his note-book. "It is much fun to look at the world through this grand instrument, that brings faraway things right up close to your eyes."

Smiling fondly, Hatfield handed her the glasses. They had grown to know and like one another quite well in the past twenty-four hours, and Hatfield was a trifle envious of young Slim Boley. Here was indeed a delightful señorita—much woman, as her countrymen would say. He bit off a sigh, and went back to studying the countryside and filling in details and landmarks on his map.

North and south ranged a wilderness of peaks and domes, with the sharp cleft of Comanche Cut breaking across the heights in the near south, and beyond that the rift of South Pass showing dimly in the distance. To the west was the Neshobe Valley, the Mill Iron spread, and Partlow. On the east Jubilee Junction lay in the valley of Big Musket River.

Angela uttered soft cries of awed pleasure as she swept the rugged mountain landscape with the high-powered binoculars, and Hatfield smiled with vicarious satisfaction and went on sketching in pertinent features on his chart. On leaving here, he planned to head for Comanche Cut and see if he could flag a westbound train to secure safe passage for Angela to Partlow. Then he would return to Jubilee, and begin recruiting an army. It would be a costly venture to attempt an invasion of this valley. The best bet would be to catch the bandits outside of their stronghold, if possible. They always seemed to know which trains carried the richest shipments. Perhaps therein lay the answer to baiting the trap.

Some warning instinct prompted the Ranger to turn and survey the outer slope at his back. Their horses had been left in a cluster of rocks about twenty feet from the rim, and on the mountainside below he saw two riflemen prowling upward. Two Mexicans or half-breeds, judging by their looks and dress, who must have cut the trail of a pair of strange horses, and were climbing up to investigate.

Hatfield reached for his Winchester, and then shook his head. Shooting would bring the whole pack out, and he'd never get Angela to Comanche Cut. He had to stop these two without using a gun. But *how*?

Angela, diverted from her pleasure by his change in position, lowered the glasses and followed his stare down-mountain, her dark eyes widening fearfully as she spotted the climbing men. She trained the glasses on them, and murmured: "Manuel and Lopez."

"Friends of yours?" inquired Hatfield.

Angela shuddered in revulsion. "No, I detest them. Why don't you shoot them? Before it's too late."

"Gunfire would bring the whole gang out after us, Angela. I'm trying to think of some other way." Hatfield gazed at the clump of boulders, in which their mounts were ground-tied. If he could dislodge one of those, the drop was steep enough, and slides were not uncommon on these heights. But they were big and heavy for one man to move. If Torquay was here, they could roll one together.

ANGELA said, gaze still focused on the climbers, "Manuel's the moon-faced one; Lopez is long and slimy like a snake. Sometimes I think they killed my Chico. . . . They were always jealous and afraid of him."

"Stay here under cover, Angela," said Hatfield, tucking his note-book into his shirt pocket. "Don't move. And don't use that carbine of yours, unless you absolutely have to."

Taking his own Winchester, he slid over the edge and worked his way downward with silent caution to the ledge where the horses waited. After closer scrutiny he selected the most likely-looking rock, and looked about for something to use as a prying lever. But there wasn't a thing within reach or view. He'd have to rely on sheer man-power, and the boulder looked as solid as part of the mountain itself.

Finding firm footholds and planting his boots, Hatfield leaned into the great rock to secure hand grips and began to exert increasing pressure, lifting and driving with arms and shoulders. The boulder was set fast, massive and immovable. He couldn't budge it in the least.

With sweat starting out all over him, he bent to the task again, getting every ounce into the effort. Once the boulder seemed to groan, stir and start, but his boot lost traction, slipped, and the rock settled back into place once more, rooted and rigid. That was enough to discourage any man.

After a brief rest, Hatfield started all over again, bucking and straining against that solid mass until he thought his brain and heart would burst wide open. But now it was giving, ever so little, and he dug in and renewed his attempts, heaving and surging with all his strength and will. The rock was moving, creaking and rasping on its foundation, and the Ranger lunged in and fought it like a live enemy, his shoulder and hands worn raw against the stone.

A TALL TEXAS TALE

Drug On The Market

COLOMBO NOSTROM, of Amarillo, was the best barkeep in all Texas. His specialty was mixed drinks. But once he almost met his Whiskyloo when a stranger happened by and boasted that he could taste any mixed drink and name its ingredients.

Colombo fixed a fancy glassful and set it on the counter. The feller tasted it, smacked his lips and accurately named the contents. Colombo was surprised but not discouraged, because there was plenty more where that came from. Drink after drink he made, and each time the expert came through perfectly.

After Colombo had exhausted his bag of tricks he pretended to make a very complicated mixture, then placed on the bar a glass of plain water.

The wizard took a sip, smacked his lips and frowned. Then he sipped at the water again and again. "You've got me on this one," he admitted finally. "Never tasted anything like it, but I'll tell you this much— it won't sell."

—W. L. Hudson

Once more! Again! Now! The boulder gave and rolled, with a crumbling roar, dropping down the cliff face, and Jim Hatfield fell gasping and moaning on hands and knees.

There were screams from below, cut off and lost in the thunder of the growing landslide, as the great tumbling rock carried others along with it, and torrents of dirt and dust gushed up into the sunlit air. Down the mountainside surged the avalanche in smoky chaos, and as the dust cleared Hatfield observed that one Mexican had vanished, but the other was still struggling there on the slope, half-buried, his rifle gone, but alive and striving to clamber free of the backwash of earth and talus debris. The lank reptilian one that Angela had called Lopez.

The man threshed and scrambled clear, dirt-smeared from head to heels and groping for his pistol. That weapon had been swept away, along with his rifle, but his blackened fist rose with a steel blade gleaming in it, and Lopez climbed upward, snarling like a berserk animal. Hatfield unsheathed his own knife, and went over the jagged brink of the ledge in a long flying leap, with Angela's scream of protest faint in his ears. But it had to be done, because Lopez had spotted his pistol and was plunging back after it.

The Ranger landed in a drift of gravel, sinking to his knees, and Lopez wheeled to face him with knife ready, abandoning hope of reaching his gun. They wallowed toward one another in the soft clinging dirt. Lopez slashed out with a sweeping stroke, the blades clashing and grinding off sparks as Hatfield caught it on his hilt.

As the blades disengaged and rasped together again, they closed and caught each other by the wirst. Locked together they reeled about in a grotesque slow-motion dance, the gravel dragging heavily at their legs. It was a test of pure strength now, and the Mexican had no chance against the powerful Ranger. Terror distended his eyeballs and set his mouth slackly agape, as he felt the terrible strength of Hatfield crushing his knife-hand wrist numb.

WITH a mighty heave of his left arm, Hatfield yanked the Mexican in hard against the freed blade in his great right fist, and felt the hot blood on his knuckles as the steel sank to the hilt. Lopez shivered and collapsed like an empty sack, his bulbous eyes fixed in a dying stare. Flinging the man backward down the slope, Hatfield thrust the reddened blade into the gravel to clean it, and mounted the grade with sickness stirring in the pit of his stomach. He didn't like to use the steel, but sometimes it had to be done.

Angela was waiting on the ledge by the horses, horror in her dark eyes and frozen features, but forcing a thankful smile when she saw that Hatfield was all right.

"Sorry, Angela, but it had to be done that way," Hatfield told her gently. "If I'd started shooting, we never would have gotten out of here. And he was going after his gun down there. . . . Now we'd better ride for the railroad pass."

In mid-afternoon they sat their horses on the rim over the steep narrow defile of Comanche Cut, the scene of so many train robberies in recent months, and heard a freight laboring up the grade from the east and Jubilee Junction. They found a break in the wall, one of several used by the bandits, and descended a well-worn trail to the roadbed. A passenger train wouldn't have stopped or slowed for anyone in this ill-fated passage, but the Ranger was able to flag down the freight, explain the situation and his status, and get Angela and her horse aboard for the trip to Partlow.

She kissed him with spontaneous warmth on parting, and his lips were still tingling pleasantly as he watched the freight train roll on westward in the Cut, before turning Goldy in the opposite direction to ride for the Junction.

Now maybe he could get things organized and open the campaign that should eventually lead to the destruction of the Alameda outlaw force. It would be interesting to discover just who the actual leaders of the outfit would turn out to be. He suspected Yoke Freeman in Partlow,

for one, and possibly Harry Nourse, for another. They were wholly unlike one another, but both were capable of running such a ring of renegades; both fundenmentally were lawless men. Rip Valo and Anse Abernathy couldn't be anything more than straw bosses, subchiefs in the organization, as Hatfield saw it. Hired gunmen, and not exactly tophands at that, was the best rating he could give that pair.

But he wanted them, as much as he wanted any of the bunch, for killing Pogel. That was a personal issue for Jim Hatfield, and Rip and Anse were going to pay in full.

CHAPTER VI

Over the Hump

JUBILEE had been waiting impatiently for the return of the big Ranger. Gray Silloway, still bowed with grief, was on the job just the same, and anxious to get the machinery of law and vengeance geared for action. Phyllis was under the doctor's care, desolate without her brother Tommy, and Earl Mabry was becoming rather annoyed with her. As someone remarked, "Long as Earl's alive he can't see any reason for mourning too long over anybody else."

Earl Mabry seemed to have taken on stature and self-importance in recent days, and Grav Silloway sometimes eyed him with a distaste that hadn't been in evidence before.

Slim Boley had already talked likely possemen into r'aring to go, and Slim himself was the most eager of them all.

The civic leaders wanted Hatfield to make his report in open meeting at the town hall, but he refused. Gray Silloway suggested a closed meeting in the Divisional Headquarters of the Southern Pacific, but again the Ranger balked.

"I'm reporting to you and you alone, Mr. Silloway," he said urgently, "and I'm laying plans with nobody but you—and maybe Slim Boley. There's a leak in your organization here. The robbers never hit a train unless it's loaded with loot, as of course you must have noticed. We can't take a chance on anybody."

"Surely you can take Earl Mabry into your confidence?"

"Not even him," Hatfield said firmly. "I'm sorry, but that is how it's got to be."

"All right," conceded Silloway, with a weary sigh. "What are your plans anyway?"

Hatfield revealed what he had discovered in the Alamedas, and asked, "When's the next big shipment scheduled to go out?"

"Tomorrow night. Pay-roll cash for the Consolidated Mines and Landry-Olson Lumber Company."

"Good. We'll remove the cash and fill the strong-boxes with paper-stuffed money-bags. Send the money by stage through South Pass, in order to get it there somewhere near on time. Tell everybody on the train to offer no resistance when they're held up. Boley and I will have a posse in the mountains to block the hideout entrance and trap the robbers inside."

Silloway contemplated at some length. "Sounds pretty good," he finally admitted. "The hardest part will be switching the money. Earl could take care of that better than anybody else."

"Earl's not going to know a thing about it," declared the Ranger. "Nobody is except you and me. You can handle the transfer all right, I know."

"Well, I guess so," muttered Silloway. He had lost some of his assurance since his son's death, but Hatfield figured it would come back in due time.

"There are a few of the finer points to be smoothed out," Hatfield confessed. "To avoid forewarning the bandits, I thought we'd hitch on a couple of stock cars at the last minute, and take the posse up on the train. Unload this side of Comanche Cut. If we rode up ahead of time, their scouts might spot us and lay off the train that night. Too, in order to keep anyone in the posse from getting word to the

bandits, I don't intend to organize the posse till an hour or so before train time. Until then, nobody but you, Slim Boley and I will know of this trek on which we are setting out."

As they left the superintendent's office together, Hatfield decided, "I'll go and have a talk with Slim now."

Earl Mabry met them in the hallway, his charming smile not quite concealing the suspicious resentment in his eyes. "Well, gentlemen, I seem to be a little late for the conference. What's on the program?"

SILLOWAY, occupied in lighting a cigar, made no reply. Jim Hatfield said, "Nothing in particular, Earl, unless you want to go out and scour the hills with me for some better clues than I've got so far."

Earl Mabry's patrician features tightened into a menacing mask. "Ranger, I've got a job here that's somewhat more important than riding the hills on a wild goose chase like that."

"Figured that, Earl," Hatfield said evenly. "Reason I didn't invite you to sit in. . . . See you later." The two men went on out the door, leaving the immaculate young man glaring after them.

Silloway hastened homeward, and Hatfield turned into the Longhorn Saloon and found the tall, blond Boley lounging moodily at the bar over an untasted drink. Calling for a bottle and glasses, Hatfield led the young railroad detective to a far corner table where they sat down to discuss the strategy of the coming campaign. Slim came instantly alive and alert, as soon as he comprehended there was to be action tomorrow night, and his lean, boyish face lighted up like a torch when he was told about Angela Ibenez.

"I'm sure glad she broke away from that slob of an uncle of hers," Boley drawled, with feeling. "Some girl, isn't she? I'll have to hit Partlow as soon as we get them train robbers bagged up—or put under."

They spent a pleasurable hour or so, in which Hatfield outlined his plans for rounding up a posse just before train time the following night, and then loading it aboard stock cars. Boley assured Hatfield he would have no trouble raising enough good men to go along on such short notice, since Tommy Silloway had been a popular favorite in the community. The citizens were still seething over his death and over the other killings. Slim himself boiled anew when he heard that little Pogel had been shot down.

"It was Pogey who introduced me to Angela," Slim said bitterly. "We had a lot of fun with old Pogey."

"They'll answer for Poge, Slim," promised Hatfield. "But first I'm hoping they'll lead us to the man on top. When they find out that their take tomorrow night is worthless, they'll break from the bunch and run for the boss—or bosses. You and I'll tag along and see where they light. Then we'll move in and take them."

"That's the ticket!" gritted Slim Boley. "That sure sounds sweet to me."

The following evening when the Baldwin locomotive pulled the westbound train into Jubilee Junction, three cars were coupled to the train—two of them stock cars loaded with saddled horses.

Hatfield thought he detected a stricken look on Earl Mabry's face on learning of the extra car carrying the horses, but he couldn't be sure it wasn't just anger at being left in the dark. Mabry swore the procedure was so unusual that railroad high brass would surely object to sanctioning it, but Gray Silloway just scowled at him and told Hatfield to go ahead as planned. And when the train went out, only a few minutes behind schedule, an extra passenger coach was filled with heavily armed men. Heading for the mountain barrier, the train began the long, gradual climb up the pass to Comanche Cut and over the Hump.

This side of the cut the train made an unscheduled stop, and the possemen disembarked to lead their horses down the ramps from the stock cars, and swing into saddle. The train waited there for the riders to get a start, then chugged slowly upward along the mountain passages.

All railroad employees and passengers had been instructed to make no resistance whatever, in case they were held up, because to resist would be suicidal.

THE moon was nearly at the full, and the sky was almost cloudless. Hatfield and Boley rode at the point with the veteran railroad detective, Shull, and Deputy Novak who were to command the two detachments of the posse when it split near the summit. Shull was to cover the holdup in the Cut, see that there was no more wanton slaying, then trail the bandits toward their hideaway. Novak's detail would be waiting at the valley entrance to block the pass, and the outlaws would be caught between the two divisions of the posse.

Abernathy and Valo, and any other chieftains who might be on hand were to be permitted to escape so that Jim Hatfield and Slim Boley could follow them to the headquarters and the top men of the outlaw organization. The Ranger and Boley would ride with Shull's crew until such a break occurred.

They reached Comanche Cut ahead of the train, and from the lofty rimrock saw that the bandits were waiting along the walls of the right-of-way below. The holdup went like clockwork. There was no shooting, then the robbers filed up the trail through a break in the cliff and rode northward over the timbered heights. Hatfield and Boley trailed them quite closely, with Shull and the main body following at a more discreet distance.

When the outlaws halted and gave signs of agitated confusion and angry disgust, Hatfield assumed that Abernathy and Valo had discovered that their supposedly rich haul was just so much waste paper and dirt. After some argument, two riders broke away westward, and the main band pushed on toward their hidden valley in the north. Hatfield and Boley took after the westbound pair, and the Ranger soon recognized Abernathy and Valo.

So far everything had developed exactly according to plan, almost too good to be true, as Slim Boley remarked, adding humorously, "You never told me you could read the future, Hatfield. Rangering must be plumb simple for a man with your supernatural powers."

"I can't, Slim—and its probably just as well," Hatfield said, laughing. "I can only guess and figure, like anybody else. And the only simple thing about this business is to stop a lot of lead that you don't really need nor want."

"That's for damn sure," agreed Boley drily. "I've learned that much in my short span."

About an hour later they heard gunfire crackle and roll off behind them to the north and east, and knew that the pincers of the posse were closing in on the train robbers.

At first it looked to the trailers as if Valo and Abernathy were lining out for the Ibenez trading post, but the trace veered away from there. Then it almost looked as if the Mill Iron was their destination, which Hatfield couldn't understand, but it shortly became apparent that they were going to bypass the ranch, too. Which left Partlow, or some place in that vicinity, as their probable objective.

Somewhere between midnight and morning, the Ranger and his young comrade lost track of their quarry, and could not pick up the trace again. But Hatfield said it really did not matter much now. Anse and Rip were pretty certain to show up in Partlow this forenoon, and likely in the company of their superiors.

"They heard that shooting, Slim, and they know their string is beginning to run out. It won't be hard to spot them in town."

"I hope they haven't got hold of Angela," murmured Slim Boley. "They might figure she gave them away, you know. Abernathy and Valo must have seen her side old Pogey, when they were trying to get back to finish you in that canyon."

"I don't think they'll bother her, Slim," said Jim Hatfield, not altogether truthfully. He was voicing a hope rather than an opinion. For the possibility of which Slim spoke was real enough to chill him

through and turn him sick inside. If Partlow *was* the outlaw headquarters, then Angela was in grave danger.

"Can you get any more speed out of that blue bronc, Slim?" inquired Hatfield, trying to sound casual.

"I can try," said Boley, equally casual-sounding, but even more fearful and troubled, underneath.

CHAPTER VII

Red Runs the Neshobe

DISTRAUGHT and worn after a sleepless night, Angela was at breakfast with her cousins, when she heard hoofs clatter and chop in the street outside. Then saddle leather squeaked, spurs jingled on crunching boots, and a heavy fist jarred the door.

Angela had been living in dread of this, and now it had come. Frozen in her chair, she knew who it was, even before her aunt opened the door.

There stood Rip Valo, raw-boned, ugly and bearded, and behind him slouched Anse Abernathy, deceptively plump, innocent and smiling. They looked as if they had been riding all night. Their sunken bloodshot eyes saw no one but Angela, and she saw death in those eyes.

"Come on, girl," Valo beckoned imperiously.

"Why?" she quavered. "Why should I —come with you?"

"Because you are our good friend," Abernathy said, his smile widening. "Come, Angela *mia*, to a better breakfast than this."

Angela rose as if hypnotized and walked numbly toward the door. She had no alternative. There was no one in Partlow to stop these men, no law worthy of the name Nourse and Freeman owned the local marshal and his deputies. She didn't want to make a scene that would frighten and disgrace her relatives here.

"*Es nada*—nothing," she told her puzzled aunt, with a brave false smile.

Sensing something evil, the smaller children began to wail and weep. Little Esteban rushed at the men in the doorway, shouting, "You go way! You leave her alone!" Rip Valo cuffed him to the floor with a cruel back-handed sweep, and the boy lay their sobbing. Angela stooped to lift him, but Rip snatched her wrist and yanked her outside, kicking the door shut behind him.

The two outlaws walked down the street leading their horses, with Angela between them. It was early morning, the unrisen sun just brightening the eastern sky above the Alamedas. Few people were up and about. Most of the stores and saloons were still closed and shuttered, and the tie rails along the way were empty.

"We ought to drag you at the end of a rope," Valo gritted to Angela.

"We want to thank her first, Rip," purred Abernathy. "For shooting at us the other day. For taking that Ranger to our hideout. For getting our whole outfit wiped out."

"Last night we held up the train," Valo said, "and got money-bags full of dirt and trash. We thank you for that favor too, sister."

They went around back of Nourse's Silver Wheel Casino, and tied their spent salt-rimed broncs there. Neshobe Creek flowed low and still in the morning grayness, and in the background roosters crowed and dogs barked. Angela's captors shoved her through a rear door into a well-fitted office, where Harry Nourse was chewing on his golden toothpick and Yoke Freeman was sipping black coffee and puffing a huge cigar.

"What we going to do with this one?" Rip Valo asked, reaching for a whisky bottle and splashing out drinks for Abernathy and himself.

"Does it matter much—now?" Nourse fingered his string tie, and flecked dust off his flowered waistcoat. "We seem to be finished in these parts. The problem is what to do with ourselves."

"How far's the law behind you boys?" growled Freeman.

"They didn't follow us, Yoke," said Abernathy. "They went after the main bunch, and probably took 'em all, dead or alive."

Yoke Freeman chewed viciously on his cigar. "And Gray Silloway's still living. What the hell's the matter in the Junction? Have to go there ourselves, Harry. Can't depend on nobody else these days."

Harry Nourse gestured with a pallid hand. "Anse and Rip, take the girl in the other room—and enjoy yourselves. Yoke and I have business to discuss."

"We'll hear the business this time, Harry," said Rip Valo, grasping the bottle again. "Time enough to dally with this wench."

Abernathy held out his glass for a refill. "Too tired anyway, after being in the leather all night."

YOKE FREEMAN looked Angela over from her burnished black head to her dainty slippered toes, and tugged at his walrus mustache. "I'm rested, Harry, I'll take the Mex myself. When I'm through with her, you can throw her in one of them cribs on the flats. The cheapest one. Because she's not going to be worth much."

"She's Slim Boley's girl, Yoke," reminded Nourse, rubbing one pale emaciated cheek.

"So what? Am I supposed to be scared of that young polecat?" Freeman's laughter boomed out against the walls. "Come on, señorita."

Angela shrank away, shuddering, but Freeman caught her arm in bruising fingers and dragged her roughly after him. Nourse rose and followed them, laughing quietly. "She's a spitfire, Yoke. Perhaps you'd better use that little whip of mine on her. Or maybe I'll give her a taste of it myself."

"You can use the whip, Harry," guffawed Freeman. "I got other ideas for her."

He snapped Angela's wrist, nearly jerking her arm out of its socket, and she whimpered in spite of herself. Freeman hauled her out of the office, and Nourse paced leisurely after them.

Valo and Abernathy sank into comfortable leather chairs and relaxed, glasses in hand and the bottle within easy reach. Sunken in exhaustion and lulled by the liquor, they paid little attention at first to the faint sounds of movement in the backyard, or the nickering of their horses.

When the outlaw pair finally roused themselves and came erect, grabbing for their pistols, the back door was already crashing inward. Jim Hatfield came through, gun in hand, with Slim Boley at his heels. Rip Valo threw a hurried shot, the slug missing the Ranger but jarring Boley back through the doorway, then Jim Hatfield's Colt was blaring and bucking in his great hand. The swift shocking impacts lifted Valo backward and held him upright until his shoulders slammed the far wall, his own aimless shots raking first the floor boards, then the ceiling.

Rip Valo hung there, torn to pieces and filled with scalding death and mortal terror, his gunhand sagging and helpless, his knees slowly melting beneath him.

Anse Abernathy had leaped toward a back window, hurling a chair through the glass in a shower of brilliant fragments and plunging over the sill after it. Slim Boley was hunched against a post of the gallery, blood blackening the shoulder of his brush jacket, pistol held across his thighs. Abernathy fired at him, spouting splinters from the upright above the blond head. Instantly Slim lined and let go with his .44, driving his first one home solid.

Reeling and twitching backward, but still on his feet and working his gun frenziedly, Abernathy lurched along the river bank. Firing calmly and steadily, Slim Boley without rising from his seat, hammered three more slugs into that plump bulk, each successive smash flinging Anse back with clublike force. He tottered for an instant on the edge of the bank, then toppled backward into the stream with a resounding splash.

Jim Hatfield, hammer under thumb, waited until Rip Valo folded and pitched forward with his face against the planks, then wheeled to stride outside. He was

just in time to see Abernathy disappear over the brink into Neshobe Creek. Walking to the bank he saw Anse submerged and spreadeagled in the shallow stream, drifting a bit with the slight current as the water about him crimsoned.

When the Ranger turned back to the porch, Slim Boley had hitched himself upright against the wooden post, and was covering the office doorway with another fully loaded Colt.

"Is it bad, Slim?" asked Hatfield, plugging shells into his cylinder.

"It don't feel bad—yet."

"I'll go in after the other two."

"Not alone, you won't," drawled Boley. "I'm not hit *that* hard."

THEY moved warily into the office once more, where gunsmoke still staining the air bit their nostrils. Valo lay dead in a pool of blood. Nothing stirred in the room. The only sound was the muted bang of a door somewhere. Then footsteps pattered along a corridor, the inner door was burst open, and Angela Ibenez came flying through into the arms of Slim Boley.

"Did they—harm you any?" Slim asked through set teeth.

"No, they didn't have time. I'm all right. But you're shot, Slim. You're wounded!"

"Nothing much, Angela."

"Where are they, Angela?" asked Hatfield.

"They went out the front way and rode off," the girl sobbed. "They had horses in an alley across the street. They headed east."

Hatfield nodded. "I'll be riding after them. Slim, you get that shoulder tended to."

"I can ride with you," protested the youthful railroad lawman.

"No, you stay here, Slim, and take care of Angela. And you'd better let her take care of you."

Angela said, "They spoke of going to Jubilee Junction. They want to kill Gray Silloway, though I don't know why. But first, I think, they will go to my uncle's trading post."

"Wherever they go I'll get them," Jim Hatfield said quietly. "So long, you two. I'll see you both again."

He went out and swung aboard the sorrel, circled to the front of the Silver Wheel and crossed the street to pick up the tracks of Yoke Freeman and Harry Nourse.

He thought, with grim satisfaction, I was right about those two. I had them tagged as the ringleaders—maybe. There could be someone still higher up, of course. Fat Pedro Ibenez, perhaps—or somebody right in the Junction.

Well, time would tell for certain. And it wouldn't be long now till he would find out, either.

The bandit chieftains had taken off at a gallop, and it was easy enough to single out their fresh prints. After making sure that they had taken the northeast road that led to the Mill Iron and the Ibenez trading post, Jim Hatfield swung back toward the squalid adobe settlement. Before he pulled out of Partlow, he had to be positive that Angela and Slim Boley were safe in the lawless community, and see that Slim's wound received the proper care.

It was well that the Ranger did turn back, because the only medical man in town was off on a high lonesome—dead drunk and utterly useless.

There were no reprisals for the shooting of Valo and Abernathy, and no outlaw organization now, with Nourse and Freeman gone.

Hatfield had to treat and dress Boley's shoulder himself, and once more was thankful for the knowledge of medicine and surgery he had painstakingly acquired along his way through life.

With all there was to do, it was afternoon before Jim Hatfield took his leave of Angela and Slim, and set out on the trail of the bandit leaders. And late afternoon when he came to the Mill Iron, and saw with amazement that the hoofprints of Freeman and Nourse had turned straight in to the road that led to Howard Mabry's ranch.

CHAPTER VIII

A Friend in Need

SOMETHING warned Jim Hatfield against riding right in to the spread. He had a feeling that Nourse and Freeman were still there, in conference with Howard Mabry. Which might indicate that Howard was the big boss of the train robbers. It seemed shocking and improbable, but it was a possibility that could not be disregarded. If Howard were involved, Torquay must be, too. Pogel—and Jim Hatfield himself as well—could have been wrong about the rancher and his foreman.

Angling away in the cover of a juniper ridge, Hatfield prepared to watch the layout and wait for nightfall. Riders came and went along the Neshobe, but Freeman and Nourse were not among them. They might have long since departed, but the Ranger had a strong hunch they were closeted with the Mill Iron owner. And if Howard should be one of the outlaws, what about his brother Earl in Jubilee Junction? The information about express shipments could have come directly from the superintendent's office to the Alameda hideout.

But there was no sense in getting way ahead of himself, Hatfield acknowledged. Valo and Abernathy were dead. Nourse and Freeman were next in line—and maybe Howard Mabry, also. Take them in order, just as they came. That was the only way to do it. Eventually he would get to the man on top, the brains and will behind the bandit guns.

When darkness closed in and the crew was at supper in the cook shack, Hatfield resaddled and rode Goldy in beneath the cottonwoods and willows along the Neshobe, dismounting to lead his sorrel as he neared the ranch buildings. Leaving the golden mount behind some outlying sheds, Hatfield moved in on foot toward the adobe ranch house, staying in the shadows and treading as softly as possible. The windows of the big kitchen which also served as a dining room, glowed with yellow lamplight. Sliding along the wall to one of the windows, the Ranger removed his hat and peeped through a lower corner of the glass.

Howard Mabry and his two guests, Yoke Freeman and Harry Nouse were dining, their faces somber and etched with deep lines of worry. One glance was enough to tell the story. Yoke and Harry were reporting the recent disaster to their superior officer, Howard Mabry, who had long been known as a respected cattleman in the Neshobe country.

Sorely disappointed and troubled, Hatfield withdrew to the row of sheds to ponder the situation. He could take Nourse and Freeman without a pang of remorse, but he had grown to like Howard Mabry, and hated to think of using a gun on him. He was deep in morbid contemplation when a warning neigh from Goldy brought him spinning about. Turk Torquay stood there, high and broad on spread legs, a sawed-off shotgun lined at the Ranger. Hatfield felt as if he were as good as dead right then and there.

"What brings you shooping around here, Jimson?" asked Torquay, and his voice was pleasant and soft as ever.

"I was trailing the two men who are eating supper with Howard."

"What for?"

"Because they're outlaws—and I'm a lawman." Hatfield resolved to play it bold, frank and honest. If Turk was with the bandits, the Ranger knew he was doomed anyway. If Turk was honest and on the level, as Pogel had vowed, Hatfield's best bet was telling the truth.

"That figures," Torquay drawled musically. "I knew you wasn't any drifting cowhand. And I don't doubt that Nourse and Freeman are mixed up with them Alameda night-riders. But I hope you're not trying to frame Howard into that outfit, Jim."

"I'm not trying to frame anybody or anything, Turk," said Hatfield. "But I'm afraid Howard *is* one of them. Nourse and Freeman take their orders from him."

Torquay swore gently. "That's a damn lie!" His big paws tightened on the shotgun, and the Ranger tensed himself for the terrific blast. . . . But Turk withheld his shot, and forced himself to relax.

"Go in and take a look, Turk," suggested Hatfield. "Maybe you can get inside and overhear some of their conversation. Don't take my word for it. Go find out for yourself."

"You just want a chance to run for it, lawdog," accused the giant breed, frowning darkly under his strange reddish hair.

"I'll wait, Turk," promised the Ranger. "Word of honor on it."

TORQUAY was silent and thoughtful for a space. Then he said, "Well, I'll go have a look anyway. I can't believe that about Howard, but I don't know why you'd be lying about it either." He stalked off in the direction of the ranch house, the shotgun dwarfed in the crook of his migty arm.

Hatfield thought, he's as honest as Pogey said, and he's liable to blow up when he finds out Howard is an outlaw.

Evidently Turk had circled to use the front entrance of the house. Hatfield waited about fifteen minutes, then started forward to investigate. Turk and the other three might have their heads together, plotting the best way to get rid of a Texas Ranger without bringing any repercussions.

Hatfield reached the kitchen window, and saw that Torquay and Howard Mabry were alone in the room, on their feet and engaged in a heated argument, their raised voices distinctly audible.

"Mind your own business, Turk, and everything will be fine." Howard said.

"This *is* my business, Howard," insisted Torquay, his eagle eyes shining almost madly under the tousled auburn crest, his teeth bared whitely in the dark-skinned face. "I worshiped you, man. I practically made a god out of you. You were the father I never had, the big brother I always wanted, the pardner I never could find. And now you're mixed up with them filthy rotten murdering buzzards! It's too much, Howard. I can't take it. I feel like strangling you with my own hands!"

Torquay surged forward, the shotgun leaning on the wall behind him. Howard Mabry backed away, hand flicking to his shoulder holster. Turk's hands closed on Howard's throat before he could draw, and his eyes started from his head as those terrible fingers tightened. Howard was a big man, but Torquay was shaking him as though he were a rag doll.

Hatfield raced for the kitchen door, bursting in past the frightened cook at the stove. At the moment he stepped foot in the room Turk hurled Howard Mabry into the corner like a puppet, the crash of his impact making the crockery rattle. Gasping and purple-faced, Howard fell to his knees, but his right hand came from the left armpit with a stubby pistol glinting in the light.

"Look out, Turk!" yelled the Ranger, but Torquay was already diving for the shotgun when Howard's shot streaked past him and smashed into a glass wall-cabinet.

Catching and swinging the shotgun in one massive hand, Torquay unleashed a bellowing blast at the kneeling man in the corner. The buckshot bounced Mabry off the adobe, torn almost in two, and dropped him in a shapeless heap at the base of the wall. The cook had fled into the night, and Hatfield felt sick at his stomach. Turk stood staring at the dead man in the corner, as if he couldn't believe his eyes. Then he let the shotgun drop with a crash, and strode blindly away to the front of the house.

After a minute Hatfield went after him, and asked, "Where did Nourse and Freeman go, Turk?"

Torquay gestured vaguely. "Out—somewhere. I don't know—I don't care. I killed Howard . . . Get out, damn you to hell!"

"It was you or him, Turk."

"Don't give me that." The mild tone was flat and lifeless. "Just get out. Beat it. And don't do any talking about Howard Mabry, feller."

"I won't," Hatfield said. "I liked him too, you know."

He went out and whistled up Goldy, as men poured from the bunkhouse to find out what the shooting was about. They recognized Jimson and wanted to hold and question him, but when he showed them his Ranger badge they let him go.

AT THE stable he learned that Freeman and Nourse had ridden out in a hurry a few minutes before, taking the Pedro. And there was at least one at the Junction who quite likely was the boss of the whole bunch. Could that be the suave, dapper Earl Mabry? It scarcely seemed credible, but Jim Hatfield had found even more unlikely characters at the head of outlaw rings, with the late Howard Mabry a shining example.

He wondered what the outlaw gang had against Gray Silloway. Some old feud, perhaps, that Gray had forgotten about, or was unable to associate with his present

"Well? Any sign of Apaches?"

train east toward the Ibenez post and the Alameda Mountains. They always seemed to be one jump ahead, but he had no fear that he would be unable to catch them and old Pedro, also, before the night was over. He had an idea that Angela's uncle belonged to the robber band, too.

Things sure happened fast, once they started. In one day three of the top outlaws had died—Abernathy, Valo and Howard Mabry. Two big ones were still before him—perhaps three, if he counted troubles. Well, Nourse and Freeman could answer that, and maybe before another sunup they would.

Hatfield was dog-tired as he jogged away from the Mill Iron. Goldy was tired, too, but still strong and swift and steady beneath him. The moon was rising at his back and the stars were swarming over the Alameda ramparts ahead as Hatfield settled into the leather for another long, grim chase. He had to stop Freeman and Nourse before they reached the Junction,

to warn their undercover agent and make an attempt on the life of Gray Silloway. The gang was pretty well busted by now, but lives were not safe as long as the renegade chiefs were still at large.

He halted to feed Goldy and snatch a bite from his saddle-bags, not having eaten since noon in Partlow. That seemed like days ago, instead of hours. He hoped Angela and Slim Boley were enjoying their time together, even with the young sheriff's wounded shoulder, and once more he felt that fleeting sense of envy and loneliness. It must be nice to have a girl like Angela, someone to build your dreams and your life around, someone who placed you above all the rest of the world, who lived for the moments with you and was always waiting when you came back from places of danger, strife and death.

But it was no life for a woman, that eternal waiting and wondering, never knowing whether her man would come home in a saddle or a pine box. Not the kind of life Hatfield wanted to inflict upon the lady of his choice. When I get old enough to ride a desk chair, I'll start shopping around for a wife, he mused. Until then I'll travel single, as lonesome as that coyote crying at the moon out there.

The Lone Wolf on the nighthawk trace again. He thought of all these trails he had ridden, all the bad men he had run down. All more or less the same, and yet each one different in some way or other, as infinitely variable as humanity itself. Sometimes the chase palled on him, but never was it cut-and-dried, monotonous or routine. Hatfield needed action, danger and excitement. He craved those things as other men might crave wealth or power, women or liquor. It was his strength and his weakness, at once: that need for violence and peril, the matching of muscles and skill, courage and nerve and willpower, mind and initiative.

The night was colder in the foothills, and the chill crept into Hatfield's weary bones and set them to aching. In this vast wilderness under the limitless arch of the sky, it was as if he were the last man left alive in the world. As though he could ride on and on forever, without getting anywhere or meeting another human being.

But Ibenez' trading post was not far ahead now, he tried to convince himself, aware that his mind was becoming fanciful from exhaustion and strain. There would be someone at the Mexican place; Pedro if nobody else.

HARRY NOURSE and Yoke Freeman, too, if the Ranger was lucky. It wouldn't be exactly a friendly reunion, but almost anything was perferable to this aloneness. He had to take them this side of the Junction anyway. It wasn't going to be any cinch to take the three of them, but he'd have to manage it somehow.

The trail bent around a hill shoulder and brought the Ibenez layout into view, looking abandoned in the thin mountain moonlight. No lights at the windows, no horses or mules in the corral, no sign of life anywhere. Pedro must have gone on with Nourse and Freeman, but his Mex handy man might be asleep in the cabin. Or they might all be staked out with rifles, waiting for the law to ride into the post.

Hatfield made a complete circuit of the place, searching for bushwhackers without success, before he advanced into the moonlit clearing to approach the log buildings.

CHAPTER IX

Highland Chase

HATFIELD'S shout finally brought lamplight and activity within the main cabin, and a timid-accented voice called out: "*Quien es?* Who is there, please? I am Pablito, alone in this place."

"Open up, Pablito," Jim Hatfield said. "I want food and drink, and maybe a place to sleep. I will pay."

"Is very late, senor, and I am not brave like the *padrone.*"

"Where did Pedro go?"

"He rode into the mountains with two *compadres*. They have important business in Jubilee Junction, I think."

"Open up or I'll break in, Pablito," threatened Hatfield, with swelling impatience.

It took the Mexican a long time to open the door, but when the Ranger walked inside he understood why. A loop was dropped over his shoulders and tightened about his arms, and a wiry body landed on his back with a muscular arm clamping a strangle-hold upon his throat. Pablito, his timidity gone, lunged in to aid his accomplice. Hatfield went down under their combined weight, his arms bound tight to his sides, his breath cut off by that relentless grip on his neck.

Rolling and heaving with explosive might, he thrashed about on the earthen floor, carrying the two leechlike Mexicans with him and upsetting chairs and tables. With a final bursting effort, the Ranger broke that strangle-hold, tossed his assailants left and right, and freed his arms as he reared upright.

Pablito and his friend were upon him again like twin wildcats, clawing and striking and clinging tenaciously, and the interlocked trio crashed from wall to wall in a wild whirling tangle, as the big lawman fought to break away and get a shot at them with his fists.

At last, with a bull-like rush, Hatfield dashed Pablito into the wall with such force that his eyes glazed as the air swished from his lungs, and his grappling arms fell slackly away from the Ranger's body. Freed of one antagonist, Hatfield flung the other clear across the room, where the Mex bounced off the logs and dropped groaning on his face.

By that time Pablito was up and in again with maddened ferocity, and this trip a knife glittered in his sinewy hand. The Ranger dodged the first wicked slash, taking a shallow cut on the upper arm, then he had a crushing steel grip on the wrist of the knife-hand and was whipping Pablito about in a crazy spinning circle, his feet off the floor. The other Mexican came crouching forward, a blade now shimmering in his fist. Hatfield hurled Pablito bodily through the air at the Mex's fighting companion.

Their bodies collided with a jolting smash, and they fell entangled into the splintered wreckage of a table and chairs, sprawling there moaning and gasping and half-senseless. Hatfield, his broad chest laboring spasmodically and his bronze face glistening with sweat, drew his right-hand Colt and waited for the Mex pair to recover and return to the fray.

"Ought to—blast you—both," he panted. "But I suppose—you were just—following instructions."

"Is true," Pablito sobbed, as soon as he was able to speak and stir. "Please believe, señor. Do not kill. We meant—no harm. Just to hold you here—until they were—far away." He got up, slowly and painfully, rubbing his numbed wrist, and helped his stunned partner to his feet. Beaten and humble they stood before the big Ranger, their heads bent and their legs trembling.

"All right, I'm not going to shoot you," he reassured them. "Although I don't think you were playing games with those knives of yours. Where did Pedro and his friends head for tonight?"

"The mountains, señor."

"More definite than that, Pablito." Hatfield gestured with his gun.

"The valley of outlaws first. Then on to the Junction."

"Why do they want to kill Gray Silloway, the railroad man?"

PABLITO spread his shaking palms. "I know nothing of that business, señor."

"What did they tell you?" demanded Hatfield.

"They said a man might come. A big man on a yellow horse. They said to hold him here. But not to kill him—unless we had to."

Hatfield smiled slowly. "All right, boys. Get me something to drink and eat, and I'll ride on."

On the trail once more, the land lifting steadily now toward the moon-bright

peaks of the Alamedas, Jim Hatfield passed through the narrow canyon where Pogel had died, after saving a Ranger life, and he was saddened by that.

And other things. Howard Mabry dead, and Turk Torquay was heartbroken after killing him. Gray and Phyllis Silloway were mourning for Tommy, and unaware of the menace in the handsome Earl Mabry, who wanted to marry the girl—and acquire her father's position as Divisional Superintendent.

Reaching the cabin in which he had stayed with Angela Ibenez, Hatfield decided to unsaddle and spend the rest of the night there, since both he and Goldy needed sleep and rest. It was lonely and desolate in the camp, and the Ranger's dreams were weird, peopled more with the dead than with the living.

In the morning he breakfasted and pushed on, reaching the outlaw hideout before noon. The valley was completely deserted. The three riders he was pursuing had been there and gone on, apparently in the direction of Comanche Cut. Hatfield surveyed the scene of battle at the entrance of the valley, marked by fresh graves and hoof-trampled earth, the littered brass of spent shells, bullet-scarred rocks and trees, punctured canteens and broken guns and abandoned hats, jackets and saddle gear.

The reign of the train robbers had ended here, but they were still an evil threat against humanity as long as Harry Nourse and Yoke Freeman and Pedro Ibenez were above the ground.

Southward from the hideaway, the trace of three horsemen led toward the Cut, and Hatfield knew from the signs that his men were not far ahead of him at this point. With luck, he would take them before they reached Jubilee. If they got there before him, Gray Silloway would die, and the renegade road agent in the Junction would either remain unidentified or escape with the other bandit leaders.

North of the railroad pass, the trail wound through a deep rocky corridor that was an ideal spot for an ambush. Hatfield considered taking a much longer route around the spot, but decided he could not spare the time. Halfway through the passage lead snarled on the sunny air, the lash of it fanning his cheek, and quick as light he was out of saddle with his carbine and ordering Goldy down behind a jumble of boulders. The rifle went on crashing, the bullets screeching off the stone surfaces in front of them. There seemed to be only one sniper, evidently left behind to check the Ranger, while his companions pressed on toward the Big Musket and the Junction. But one was sufficient in these circumstances.

Nailed down by the accurate shooting and holding his own fire, the Lone Wolf crawled among the rocks, seeking the best vantage point. The enemy marksman had the advantage of higher elevation and the natural barricade of a ledge on the wall at Hatfield's right. The Ranger could neither advance nor retreat, and darkness was hours away yet. It looked like a hopeless stalemate, and Jim Hatfield's chance of catching his quarry this side of Jubilee was gone.

Scanning the sheer sides of the defile, Hatfield finally found a chimneylike break in the cliff on the right. It was within reach of this shelter, and it might be scalable. Anything was better than lying here in the sun-scorched boulders waiting for night. Hatfield unhooked his spurs, hung them on his saddle, and started creeping toward that fissure in the right-hand wall. It looked as if it might extend to the top, a tough and dangerous climb, but well worth the try. Once on the rim, he could at least maneuver forward and get a shot at his adversary.

RIGGING a rawhide sling on his Winchester he slung it over one shoulder and began working his way up the rock chimney. The cracks and knobs were scarcely adequate for hand-and foot-holds, but he had to make them serve. In stretches there were no crevices or projections whatever, and Hatfield was forced to hitch himself up with agonizing slowness, back jammed against one wall, boots

planted on the other. It was painful and tedious work in the afternoon heat, and sweat poured all over his rangy frame. But it was far preferable to lying pinned down and helpless in the pass below.

The chimney widened toward the top, when it finally came into sight, but it was going to take some doing to maneuver that last fifteen feet. A shorter or less agile man never could have made it, but Jim Hatfield was long and limber enough to bridge the increasing gap and inch his way upward, body and legs arched and straining between the sheer walls. It was with vast relief that he finally hauled himself onto the summit and stretched out on the rimrock panting and sweating, to wait for his breath and heart-beat and pulse to slow to normal.

On all fours he began to creep forward along the rim, spotting the gunsmoke every time the enemy sniper fired down the passage.

After awhile the Lone Wolf caught glimpses of a black-garbed man, and at first thought he was Harry Nourse in his habitual broadcloth. Then he realized there was too much bulk for this sniper to be the gambler, and he knew it was fat Pedro Ibenez who had been delegated to stop the Ranger. Angela's uncle, Pedro, who looked lazy and sloppy and harmless, but who had a cruel streak as wide as his own corpulent body.

To target on the foe, Hatfield would have to stand up. He levered a shell into the chamber and rose into a crouch, the Winchester ready. Lead screamed off the rimrock at his feet as the alert Mexican down there spotted the movement and switched his aim to the top. Hatfield lined his sights and squeezed off, the butt slugging his shoulder, and saw stone splinters spurt into that round dark face.

Pedro Ibenez jerked back, snarling with pain and anger, and inadvertently exposing more of his immense form. Hatfield cut loose with a burst of rapid firing, pumping shots as fast as he could work the trigger, and lever and take aim again.

Pedro fired twice more, both shots singing overhead, as the .44-40s slashed into his gross hulk and drove him back from the barrier to lie squirming on the ledge, fully exposed. The Ranger had drawn another bead on him but held his fire, thinking that the fat Mex was finished. In a minute more Pedro subsided into a motionless sprawl, and the Lone Wolf climbed down the broken wall toward that ledge.

The fat man was alive and conscious when Jim Hatfield reached him, but with three bullets through the chest he didn't have long. He lay on his back staring up with hot black eyes, while beads of anguish glistened on his full olive features.

"Where are your friends, Pedro?" asked the big Ranger.

"Don't molest me, man. I'm dying."

"Where did they go?" persisted Hatfield.

"To the Junction!" Ibenez spat out in furv. "To kill Gray Silloway."

"What have they got against Gray?"

The Mexican grimaced, blood drooling from his thick lips. "Years ago—Silloway drove them—out of a town. In shame—

A small TEXAS TALE

NOT GEORGE

A TEXAS rancher was punishing his young son for pushing the backhouse into the creek.

"But, paw, you shouldn't ought to punish me," the kid complained. "After all, when you asked me who did it, I told you the truth. Gee whiz, when George Washington chopped down the cherry tree and told his father he did it, his father didn't punish him for telling the truth!"

"That's so," said the rancher, "but George's father wasn't in the tree!"

—E. J. Ritter, Jr.

and disgrace."

"And you?"

"Yes—me, too." Ibenez glared wildly. "Now go away! Let me die—in peace."

Hatfield took the Mexican's handgun and picked up the rifle. The man seemed paralyzed, unable to stir, but the Ranger couldn't be certain of that. He had seen Rangers killed by men they figured were helpless and practically dead.

"Can I do anything for you, Pedro?" he inquired.

PEDRO IBENEZ did not answer, or even glance at Hatfield again. He had lost interest in everything except his agony and his dying. A final spasm shook his enormous body, and it was all over. Hatfield turned away and descended from the ledge to the trail, whistling Goldy up the corridor.

Stepping into leather he rode on, pausing at the end of the pass to untie Pedro's horse and lead the animal along behind the sorrel. Another one gone. Nourse and Freeman—and one other—still to get. But the killers were sure to reach the Junction ahead of the protecting law now, and that could mean death for Grav Silloway.

At Comanche Cut, Hatfield dropped from the rim down the looping trail to the right-of-wav. and turned eastward along the track. Half an hour later a locomotive whistled behind him, and Hatfield pulled aside to try and flag the passenger train from Partlow. The engineer recognized the big Ranger, and brought the train to a clashing shuddering stop. A ramp was lowered from the baggage car for the horses, and after getting them aboard the Lone Wolf drifted back into the passenger coach.

"Hatfield!" cried a familiar voice, and the name was echoed at once in a girl's softer tones.

His gaunt rugged features and green eyes lighted at the sight of Slim Boley and Angela Ibenez, and he took the seat opposite them. The lanky tow-headed Texan and the vivid dark señorita did make a striking couple, he observed, and it was a great pleasure to find them on board. Slim's left shoulder was bandaged, his arm was in a sling, but he said his wound was healing nicely.

Hatfield told them what had happened since he'd left them in Partlow, and Angela could feel little grief over the death of her uncle, but both were surprised and stricken by the news about Howard Mabry.

"Then Earl's probably one of them, too," Slim Boley drawled. "I never did quite like or trust that slick son, and I always hated to see Phyllis Silloway with him. But Gray seemed sold on Earl."

"That may cost Gray his life, too," Jim Hatfield said grimly. "Unless this train gets us into Jubilee Junction in time to save him."

CHAPTER X

Poison From Within

EARL MABRY, elegant in a tailored suit, paced the floor of his suite of ten rooms in the Junction House, puffing nervously on a cigarette and trying not to look at the two dusty disheveled men who were occupying his best chairs and drinking his expensive liquor.

"Why don't you kill him?" Earl demanded. "You're the ones who want him dead."

"You can get to him, where we can't," Harry Nourse said, admiring his jeweled snuff box.

"Time you started earning your way, kid," Yoke Freeman declared. "All you've done so far is send messages and live like a king here. Time you dirtied them hands a mite, boy."

"I earned this position of mine," Earl Mabrv said. "Whv should I throw it away?"

"You earned it by bowing and scraping to Gray Silloway, yessing him at every turn," Nourse said, with cool satire. "You told us once he never really respected you

or treated you as an equal. You said you hated him."

"Maybe I do. But I want to marry his daughter."

Freeman snorted and relit a mangled cigar. "You can still marry the girl. Nobody will know you killed Gray. We'll get blamed for it. Nobody'll believe you had guts enough to kill anyone." He laughed with contempt.

Earl turned on the saloon man. "Some day I'll show you whether I've got guts or not, Freeman. You're liable to get a surprise."

"Don't scare me, sonny," jeered Yoke, gulping from his glass and brushing his walrus mustache.

"We're wasting time," reminded Nourse, inserting snuff in his lower lip. "You ought to do it before that eastbound train gets in. If that Ranger got by Pedro, he's apt to be on that train."

"You're afraid of Jim Hatfield," accused Earl Mabry.

"That his real name?" Freeman said carelessly. "Naw, we're not afraid of him, kid. But he's a gent to be reckoned with, dead-serious."

Earl Mabry resumed his restless walking. "I don't see any point in killing Gray Silloway—now. The band's broken up, shot to pieces, dead or in jail. You know Valo and Abernathy are dead, and you figure my brother's gone, too."

"We're still alive, son," Harry Nourse said. "And we want to see Gray go under."

Earl gestured fiercely. "Put him under, then!"

"Naw, you're going to do that for us," Yoke Freeman said, scattering cigar ashes on the carpet. "You can't crawl out of this one, kid. Up to now you haven't taken one single solitary risk. but you're going to burn down Gray Silloway."

"I'll never get to be super then."

"Why not, Earl?" protested Nourse. "You'll get there all the quicker with Gray gone. You're next in line, and your record is excellent. You'll have his job and his daughter—and live happily ever afterward."

"Sure, we're the ones who got to go on the dodge," Freeman said.

"No, I'll lose everything, if I kill Gray," muttered Earl Mabry. "The job, the girl, every damn thing. She'll know I did it, even if no one else suspects. Phyllis will *know!*"

"Aw, you're loco," scoffed Freeman. "Buck up and have a drink, and go and do your job like a man."

Earl ran a manicured hand through his curly hair. "Hatfield will know, too. If he had Howard tagged, he'll figure I'm involved."

"We're going to take care of that Ranger," said Yoke Freeman. "Harry and I are going to kill him before we light out of here."

"You'd better get moving, son," advised Harry Nourse. "That train's due in about twenty-five minutes, and I have a hunch that Hatfield will be on it. Pedro wasn't man enough to stop that Ranger."

EARL MABRY groaned aloud, his handsome face tortured. "I can't do it. I won't do it. You can't make me do it!"

"If you don't do it, boy, we'll turn you in to the law," Yoke Freeman promised hoarsely. "Get going now. We'll foller along to cover your back—and see that you do a good job, too."

"All right." Earl sank into a chair, head in hands. "I'll do it. And then I'll run away with Phyllis—before she hears about it. I've got her all ready to elope with me anyway. Her father has turned against me lately, and he won't sanction the marriage . . . So he'll die. And I'll get the girl anyway. And maybe his job, too."

"Certainly, you'll have everything you want, with Gray out of the way," Nourse said smoothly. "That's what we've been trying to tell you, son. Now get over to the station and do what you have to do, and Yoke and I'll be there to back your play—if necessary."

Earl Mabry rose stiffly and poured himself a large drink, sipping at it as he paced about the pleasant lamplit room. "Gray'll be alone in his office," he said musingly.

"Nobody else around headquarters at this hour. Why, it should be easy."

"Nothing to it, kid," assured Yoke Freeman, munching on his tobacco with satisfaction.

"I'll take my share of the money first," Earl said.

"Afterwards, son," corrected Nourse mildly. "We'll split it up after you've done the job."

"What about Howard's share?"

"He got his," Freeman said, before Nourse could speak.

"I don't believe it," Earl murmured, defiant and sullen.

Yoke Freeman straightened in his chair, beefy face hardening. "Don't be calling me a liar, lobo. Or you'll never live to shoot Silloway!"

"Careful, boys, careful," cautioned Nourse, with a wasted smile. "We don't want to quarrel among ourselves. Only a few of us left now. Earl, you'll get all that's coming. And maybe more than you deserve."

"And you won't get a nickel unless you kill Gray Silloway," growled Freeman. "So let's get started, kid."

Earl Mabry's sigh was almost a moan. "All right, I'll go out first. And we'll meet back here. You have my split ready, because I want to get Phyllis out of town before she hears about her dad."

"Don't fret so much, boy." Yoke Freeman laughed, pouring himself another drink. "This'll be the easiest caper we ever cut. Huh, Harry?"

Nourse nodded solemnly. "I foresee no grave difficulties in it, Yoke. Providing Earl doesn't lose his nerve."

"Don't worry about that." Earl Mabry drew the pistol from under his left arm, checked and reholstered it, finished his drink and put on his small-brimmed hat and left the room without another word. After a few minutes Freeman and Nourse drained their glasses and got up, stretching and hitching their gun-belts into place, and moving out after the young railroad executive.

"I doubt he can cut the mustard," grumbled Freeman.

"If he don't we will, Yoke," said Harry Nourse. "We've waited a long time to see Gray Silloway die."

Earl Mabry left the Junction House and walked rapidly toward the railroad station and yards. The main line seemed to be vibrating, and he wondered if the eastbound train could be running ahead of schedule. Striding past the depot he crossed a series of side tracks and moved toward the administration building. The windows of the superintendent's office bloomed with amber light, but most of the other windows were dark and empty. His mouth was dry and his heart was thumping too fast and hard. There was a sour nausea in his stomach, a chill along his spinal column, and his leg muscles twitched and quivered.

Earl thought, He won't even have a gun on him probably. What the hell am I panicky about anyway?

AS HE reached the entrance of headquarters, glancing around behind in search of Freeman and Nourse, a train whistle hooted mournfully in the west, and the sound pierced coldly through his vitals. That eastbound *was* early, for the first time in history. It would be in the yards before he could get away. This threw everything out of kilter.

Earl tried to force himself to enter the building, but he could not accomplish it. His legs wouldn't respond, his hand refused to reach for the door, and he stood frozen rigid in his tracks. To hell with them and the money and their threat of exposure! He wasn't going in there to kill Gray Silloway. He'd sneak away, circle back to get the horses and Phyllis and ride out of town at once. He wanted the girl more than he wanted the money or the job.

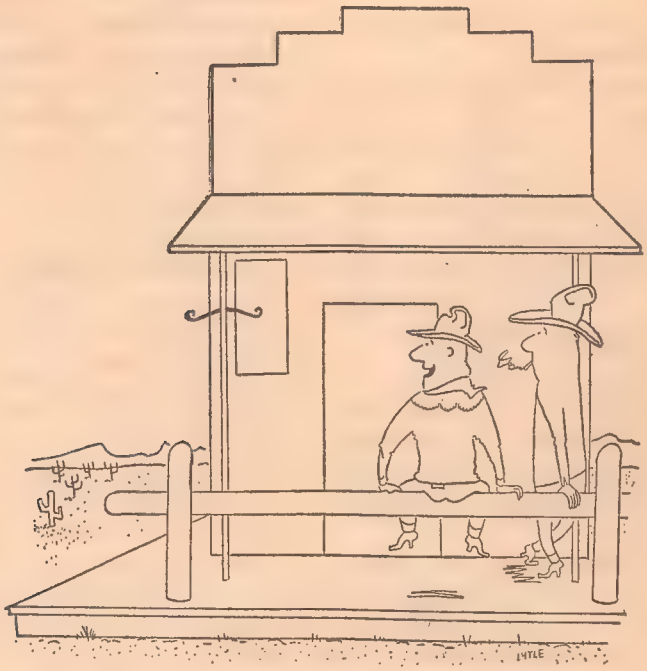
The train sounded close now, terrifyingly close, and Earl Mabry wheeled from the entrance and walked on past the office building into the deep engulfing shadows of the yard. He could lose Nourse and Freeman in this dark labyrinth of side tracks and cars and sheds.

The locomotive was grinding and wheez-

ing into the depot now, its great bronze bell clanging brazenly on the evening air. As Earl's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he caught a flicker of movement along a line of freight cars on a siding. Yoke and Harry, come to turn him back—or kill him! Suddenly he was more afraid of them than of Hatfield and the law and anything else in the universe. He wanted to live—and love Phyllis Silloway. If he had to kill Gray, in order to go on living, he would do it.

Earl Mabry whirled and ran back to the headquarters building, plunged through the entrance and up to the door of the super's office. He heard voices inside, Gray's and another man's. His chance was gone! Turning, dull and hollow, he walked slowly along the hall and out the front door.

On the outside he paused to light a thin cheroot with trembling fingers and, looking up, saw two men approaching from the station. With a chilling start he recognized the high rangy shape of Jim Hatfield, and the slender boyish figure of Slim Boley, his left arm in a sling. Steeling himself to stay and meet them, exchange smiles and greetings and let them pass on into the building, Earl Mabry discovered that he couldn't. He was going to pieces, breaking down completely, sure that his guilt was written all over him for every-



"Howdy, Slim."

body to see. One glance and that big Ranger would know—and would place him under arrest.

With a small choked cry of utter despair and terror, Earl Mabry broke into panicked flight toward the cluttered blackness of the outer yards, the cheroot dropping and scattering a tiny spray of sparks beneath his flying shoes.

Jim Hatfield and Slim Boley, suspecting that the worst had already happened to Silloway, started running after Mabry, Slim awkward and handicapped with his

wounded shoulder, falling behind as they moved into the shadowy maze of the railroad yards, where Earl Mabry had vanished.

"Stay back, Slim!" Hatfield called over his shoulder.

"Like hell," panted Boley. "The right arm's all I need to handle a gun."

"Go back and see if Gray's all right," pleaded Hatfield.

"If he's dead I can't help him," Boley said wryly. "If he's okay, he don't need me."

"You shouldn't be tearing around with that wounded shoulder."

"Save your breath. And don't forget I work for the S. P."

Hatfield halted uncertainly, peering about in the gloomy darkness. "Now where in hell do you suppose he went?"

Slim Boley pulled up beside him, teeth set against the pain in his shoulder. "At the rate he was going, he's way up the Big Musket by now. And he won't stop until he reaches the head waters, I reckon."

"Well, we won't find him in this jungle of iron and lumber," the Ranger said. "But we know he's guilty now, at any rate. Let's go back and see if we can do anything for Gray. And make sure his daughter's not in danger."

They turned back toward the lighted area of the yards, and gunfire speared roaring at them from a string of box cars on a siding. Slim Boley's hat flew off his blond head, and he dropped to the cinders without a sound beyond the thudding crunch of his lank body.

CHAPTER XI

Gunsmoke in the Yard

BEFORE the muzzle flashes faded Jim Hatfield was firing back. Then he bent to drag Slim Boley as gently as possible into the shelter of a stack of creosote-reeking ties. There were two gunmen down that side track, experts at the trade, Yoke Freeman and Harry Nourse without a doubt. One of their shots had struck, and the others had been near misses, close enough to tug at Hatfield's own clothing and sear his skin, to shower him with dirt and ashes. Now that the law men were under cover, the bandits held their fire. They knew their business all right.

Kneeling behind the ties Hatfield sought to find where Slim had been hit this time. Blood was darkening the fair hair, and he discerned a slight crease in the skull, barely more than a burn, just enough to knock the young railroad detective out. There was no break or depression in the bone, and Hatfield sighed in grateful relief. If only he had some water, he could bring Slim to at once! But the kid was safer right here, of course. It was Jim Hatfield's job to take those two outlaws, and one that he wanted to do very much.

As he waited back of the barrier, he saw the door of headquarters open and Gray Silloway emerge with a carbine in hand, and he smiled with delight to see that Gray was alive and unharmed. Shots from the renegades drove the super back inside the building, and the Ranger hoped he would stay in there.

Young Earl Mabry must have fled from the yards, and quite likely he was heading for the Silloway home and Phyllis. That was where Gray Silloway should be going, and Hatfield hoped that idea would occur to the railroad official.

Now it was time for Hatfield to get moving, take the offensive, and keep driving until he had flushed the enemy. He studied the dark terrain, and selected a course to that line of freight cars. There were shouts and confused movements in the lighted section of the yards, but no one knew what the shooting was about or who was involved in it. The Ranger couldn't expect any immediate aid from that source. Not that he particularly wanted any. Nourse and Freeman were the kind of killers he liked to take himself. He visualized them out there, Nourse chewing on that gold toothpick and Freeman chewing on tobacco, spitting from under that drooping handlebar mustache.

Jim Hatfield replaced the spent shells in his right-hand pistol.

Leaving the barricade of railway ties, bent low and moving with lithe swiftness, Hatfield skirted a junk pile with a rusting boiler, and a crumbling tool shed, to slip between two freight cars in the string from which the shots had come. Bullets crackled and splintered the corners of the cars, as he slid into their protection. One man was on top, the other on the ground. The Lone Wolf climbed to the coupling, and mounted the ladder of the forward car. When he peered over the top edge, splinters stung his cheek as a slug ripped the deck in front of him. Hatfield blazed back at the streaking muzzle light, and heard a man curse and scramble downward.

Swinging aloft the big Ranger raced along the catwalk, observing that the next car was a flat one. When he reached the end, he saw Yoke Freeman in a plaid shirt backing along the flat car, and fired down at him an instant before flame blossomed from Yoke's upflung barrel. Hatfield saw dust puff from the plaid shirt, as the .44 slug struck solidly and rolled Freeman off the edge of the platform to sprawl loosely in the cinders. Then Hatfield himself had to flatten out on the deck, as Harry Nourse opened fire from farther along the row.

Harry was on the ground to the left. Hatfield crawled to the outside ladder on the right, and clambered down the rusted iron rungs to the roadbed. He ran forward until a bullet sparked the near rail before his driving legs, then hit the dirt behind the wheels and searched beneath the car for a target. Glimpsing a vague blur of running legs on the other side of the track, Hatfield threw a shot at them and saw Nourse break stride and fall in a spurt of ashes.

ON HIS feet like a big cat, Hatfield swung up between the cars, across the coupling, and out on the other side. The blast of a gun nearly blinded him as Harry Nourse rolled to his knees and fired. The Ranger threw down swift and smooth and thumbed his hammer, the big Colt leaping aflame in his hand, the wallop of the slug slamming Harry over backward into a weed-grown ditch.

Nourse was conscious when Jim reached him, his pale face more a death mask than ever, but he was unable to lift the pistol in his bony hand. He tried to smile as Hatfield took the gun, and the other one from the shoulder rig.

"Looks like your night, Ranger. We just didn't hold the cards."

"Where did Earl Mabry go?"

"That's what beat us," Nourse whispered weakly. "If we'd left the kid out of it, Silloway'd be dead and we'd be riding out, free as the wind. They have a lot of sayings for it. One rotten apple, you know . . . And a chain's no stronger than . . . Well, no matter now."

"Where's Mabry?"

"He probably went after his girl," Harry Nourse said. "Never saw a lady's man yet that was worth a damn with a gun . . . I take it Yoke is dead?"

"I'll have to go back and check for sure."

"Did Torquay kill Howard that night—at the Mill Iron?" When Hatfield nodded, Nourse went on, "Figured he would. Had that look in his eye. Couldn't stand Howard's being an outlaw. Turk thought he was a god . . . Well, you don't have to wait for me to die, Ranger."

"You aren't dying," Hatfield said. "I'll send somebody back after you."

"Why don't you shoot me? Be a lot simpler, quicker, better all around."

Hatfield shook his head. "The Rangers can use a live witness, Harry. See you later."

His gun reloaded, Hatfield walked back along the line of box cars, halting with a cold shock when he noticed that Yoke Freeman was no longer lying where he had fallen off that platform car. Hatfield was lunging between the next pair of cars when gunshots roared at him from a pile of tools and equipment beside the track. He made it with one bullet scorching his shoulder-blade, and leaned back to the corner to cover the position to which Free-

man had crawled.

But the wounded outlaw was engaged in another duel by this time, swapping shots with Slim Boley, who had come stalking up behind him. For one blazing moment the gun flashes leaped to and fro like lightning, then Yoke Freeman's weapon was silenced and Slim Boley came walking out of the shadows, tousled hair shining palely, and pistol smoking in his hand.

"I hope he's the one that killed Tommy," said Slim. "Got a notion it might be, too. The man was about that size and build, with a droopy mustache under his scarf . . . You all right, Ranger?"

"Yeah, but I almost walked into some bullets from Freeman. He looked dead to me when he rolled off that flat car . . . How's your head, Slim?"

"It aches some," Boley confessed, grinning. "But I've had worse heads from drinking. What about Earl Mabry?"

"I think I'll find him at the Silloway house," Hatfield said. "I'm going right up there and see anyway."

They started for the administration building, and Slim remarked: "He's the last one left. I reckon you want to take him yourself?"

Hatfield inclined his high dark head. "You've done your share, Slim. And you've got Angela to think about."

"Yeah, she's probably worried. Men like us hadn't ought to get married anyhow, Hatfield."

"If I were you, and had a girl like Angela, I'd get married regardless," Jim Hatfield said, laughing softly.

"But you never did."

"Give me time." The Ranger grinned. "Some filly will throw me yet. I just hope she's as nice as Angela."

EXCITED men milled about them as they neared headquarters. Hatfield answered some of their questions and sent a group out to bring Harry Nourse in, while another man hurried off after a doctor.

Angela was waiting by the entrance, and came at once into the strong shelter of Slim Boley's good right arm. She told Hatfield that Gray Silloway had gone home, gravely concerned over the safety of his daughter Phyllis.

"I've got to see Gray," said Hatfield. "Meet you folks in the hotel, maybe half an hour." He walked away, tall and easy, and they stood looking after him.

"He isn't through fighting yet," Angela murmured wisely.

"He'll never be through fighting," Slim Boley said, with quiet pride. "Not until he's dead, Angel. And that'll be a dark bad day for all of Texas."

Goldy was waiting patiently at the depot hitch-rail, and Hatfield stepped up into saddle and pulled away toward the street and the Silloway home on the slope beyond. He hoped Gray was armed, and would be ready when and if he encountered Earl Mabry. After such a display of cowardice, a man like Mabry might turn brave as a lion, more dangerous and deadly than seasoned gunhands like Freeman and Nourse.

Because Mabry was unpredictable, irrational and a trifle unbalanced, an egotist swollen with conceit and pride, wholly selfish and arrogant, swinging from one extreme to another.

It wouldn't be easy to take Earl Mabry now. Once tonight he had cracked, succumbed to panic and terror. Now on the upswing, he could be utterly fearless, as daring and reckless as a maniac, and about as difficult to deal with.

Hatfield kicked the sorrel into a run, and took the grade toward his objective. In houses along the slanting street, lamps were blooming warm and soft, and families were sitting down to supper in peace and comfort. The moon was rimming the eastern horizon, and constellations sparkled above the jagged Alamedas in the west.

It was a pretty night, but it would be a lot prettier when Earl Mabry was in custody—or dead.

The dead were strung all the way from Partlow over the Hump to Jubilee Junction, and the campaign wasn't quite ended yet.

CHAPTER XII

End of Track

WHILE the gun battle was going on in the railroad yards, Earl Mabry rode up the hill to the Silloway house with another saddled horse on lead. He was in hopes that the four gunfighters down there would kill one another off. With both factions wiped out, Earl would be safe and secure. His confidence and spirit were returning, as he slid from saddle and tied the broncs at the side of the house. His step was jaunty, and he felt almost indomitable. He was going to be the big winner, after all. The other suckers were all losers, one way or another. Only Earl Mabry was fortune's favorite, the darling of the gods, handsome and charming and godlike himself.

Phyllis Silloway met him at the door. She had aged, lost much of her youthful bloom in the past week. She had been weeping again, he noticed with distaste, and she looked faded, washed out, pale and sickly. Earl wondered suddenly if she was good enough for him, attractive enough to be his wife. At this rate her looks weren't going to last long. Phyl couldn't seem to get over losing that brother of hers. She acted as if the world had ended with Tommy's death.

"What's that shooting, down by the depot?" she asked, listening hard. "Are the bandits after my father?"

"No, no—just some drunken cowboys letting off steam," Earl Mabry told her. "Come on, Phyl, get into your riding habit. We're moving out tonight."

"Are you crazy, Earl? I can't go like this. It would break Dad's heart."

"You said you'd go away and marry me." He gripped her arms, and drew her close.

She struggled to get away from him. "Not this way, Earl. So soon after Tommy . . . Use a little reason and judgment."

"Aren't you ever going to get over that —that brother of yours?" he demanded, releasing her angrily.

Phyllis stared at him intently. "Earl, what have you done? You look—altogether different. What's happened anyway?"

"Nothing, nothing at all." He gestured with impatience. "Git ready to ride, Phyl —if you want to marry me, ever. I'm not waiting any longer."

"It's impossible," she said coldly. "I'd have to get Dad's consent, and I don't know as he'll ever give it. You've lost favor with him, for some reason, Earl."

"Oh, the hell with him!" Mabry said, disgusted. "Who is he to judge me, or anyone else? What makes him so high and mighty?"

Phyllis sat down in an easy chair. "I don't want to quarrel with you, Earl. I don't feel strong enough to argue. Perhaps you'd better leave."

"If I leave tonight, you won't see me again," he threatened.

"Maybe it's better if I don't," she murmured. "You've changed, Earl, you're different. I don't seem to know you any more. There's something in your eyes, some secret."

Mabry glared at her scornfully. "I think you're losing your mind. I really do. You'll end up in an asylum, if you keep on this way. Probably I'd better get rid of you, before it's too late." He laughed mockingly. "Has there been much insanity in your family?"

Alarm in her tormented eyes, Phyllis raised her hands to cover her face. "Please go—leave me alone," she said, through writhing fingers. "Go away, Earl. I don't want you here—any more."

"Don't worry!" he said harshly. "I'm lucky to get out of this so easy. You're neurotic, you aren't fit to be a wife. And you don't even look decent now. Good night, lady—and good-by."

MABRY laughed and started for the door, with the girl sobbing in her chair behind him. At that exact moment Gray Silloway entered and barred Earl's way.

"What's the trouble here? What have you been doing to Phyl?"

"Not a damn thing," Mabry said coolly. "We've come to the parting of the ways, that is all."

"Good!" Gray declared, with emphasis. "And in more ways than you realize, boy. What did you bring the extra horse for tonight?"

"I thought we'd take a little ride. Phyl hasn't been getting out much."

"You thought you'd get her to run away with you, you mean."

"Well, she didn't. Now, if you'll stand aside, I'll leave."

Gray Silloway stood motionless, bulking large before the dapper young man. "Wait a minute, boy. I just learned tonight that your brother Howard was one of the outlaw chiefs. I suppose that means you've been working with them all along. Jim Hatfield wants to see you, Earl. And as of now, you are no longer my assistant. I want to fire you, before you're put under arrest."

"Am I to blame for what my brother did?"

"You're to blame for what you did—and what you are!" Gray said, with restrained hatred and fury. "You're rotten to the core, Mabry. I must have been blind not to see it sooner. Get out now—and stay out!"

Earl Mabry drew the pistol from his shoulder holster and slashed the barrel across Silloway's gray head, beating the older man to his knees. Mabry struck again with snarling ferocity, and Gray fell face-down on the rug, with blood seeping darkly through his silvery hair. Earl was crouching for another blow when Phyllis landed on his back like an enraged vixen, clawing at his eyes and throat, yanking him over backward on the floor.

They sprawled and rolled together, and Mabry hit her a brutal back-handed clout across the mouth, snapping her chestnut head back and starting the blood. He got up quickly, his cheek raked raw by her nails, and turned to stand over the unconscious Silloway and cock his revolver. Phyllis came up, screaming, and flung herself upon him once more, scratching and kicking like a demon, her mouth dripping scarlet.

Swearing savagely Earl Mabry swung about and hurled her across the room into a large leather chair. Phyllis bounded up as if on springs, and furiously charged at him again. This time Mabry struck with the gun-barrel, swiping it across her face with wicked force, knocking her flat on her back and half-senseless, blood gushing from her torn cheek.

He was on the verge of pumping a bullet into Gray Silloway when he heard hoofbeats drumming up the grade from town. Deciding to save the slug for future use, Earl Mabry burst out the front door and circled to climb onto his horse. Leaving the other mount tied there, he spurred through the back yard and across empty lots toward the next street, as Jim Hatfield rounded the corner of the Silloway home and came thundering after him.

Reining around behind a low woodshed, Mabry fired at the oncoming rider, two swift shots lancing across the flat roof. The mighty sorrel came on with unbroken fleetness, and a six-gun torched brightly from Hatfield's right hand. The .44 hammered Earl's left side, twisting and almost spilling him from saddle, but he clung on and brought the bronc around to continue the mad flight down a narrow driveway into a tree-lined residential street.

Doors flew open and hoarse voices bawled into the light-splashed darkness, as Jim Hatfield raced out the runway in back of Earl, and made a driving, leaning turn into the street that scattered huge clods of dirt against nearby buildings. Galloping at a terrific rate, the two horses hurtled along the avenue, with dust storming high over the house tops and veiling the lamplit windows.

EARL MABRY twisted and fired back, and the Ranger felt the breath of that one but refrained from shooting. Goldy was gaining at every stride now, and Hatfield could afford to wait until he had a sure shot. Earl saw that he was being run down, that further flight was

useless. A bridge over the Big Musket River loomed ahead of him. Slowing his mount Earl flung himself from leather at the rear end of the bridge. The bronc went on riderless, the hooves booming hollowly on the planks.

His left side on fire with pain, Earl Mabry scrambled for shelter beneath the bridge and fumbled fresh shells into the cylinder of his pistol. He threw a shot around the edge of the abutment, but the golden stallion came on in beautiful flowing strides. Short of the bridge, Jim Hatfield turned Goldy into a right-hand driveway in a shower of dust, leaping from saddle and diving for that side of the bridge opposite Mabry.

Underneath the wooden arch they faced one another across the width of the span, the guns flaring back and forth with shattering concussions, but Mabry was firing in a wild frenzy while Hatfield was placing his shots with cool measured consistency. The Colt jumping and blasting in his firm grip, he fired until it was empty, and Earl Mabry was beaten backward into a threshing roll down the river bank.

Ducking across beneath the timbers Hatfield emerged on the other side in time to see Earl Mabry splash limply into the Big Musket and float slowly downstream toward town with the dark current. The Ranger was too weary to try and recover the body now, and besides he wanted to get back and find out what Earl had done to the Silloways. He was afraid he would find them both dead in the house, for Earl Mabry had been a madman in this final encounter.

Goldy came running at Hatfield's whistle, and the Lone Wolf swung aloft and rode back the way he had come, hitting a fast gait to reach the Silloway home.

The house and porch were crowded with neighbors and townsfolk, and a woman announced that the doctor was on his way.

A man said, "They're beat up some around the head and face, Ranger, but they're not shot nor hurt too bad. The girl will wear a scar, I reckon—but that's better than being hitched to young Mabry. He's probably dead now anyway. Is he, Ranger?"

"He is," Hatfield said simply. "And that's the last of them, as far as I know."

"A clean sweep," the man murmured in awed tones. "Freeman and Nourse down in the yards, and Mabry up here. A great night's work, Ranger Hatfield."

"Well, I'm glad it's over," Hatfield drawled, and went inside to do what he could for Gray Silloway and his daughter Phyllis. They had suffered a lot at the hands of the Alameda bandits, but they wouldn't have to endure any more of it. He couldn't bring Tommy back, but at least he had avenged the boy's death and given Gray and Phyllis their chance to live in peace and security from here on.

Jim Hatfield might be a little late in meeting Angela and Slim Boley tonight, but they'd have a pleasant reunion when he finally was able to get down to the Junction House.

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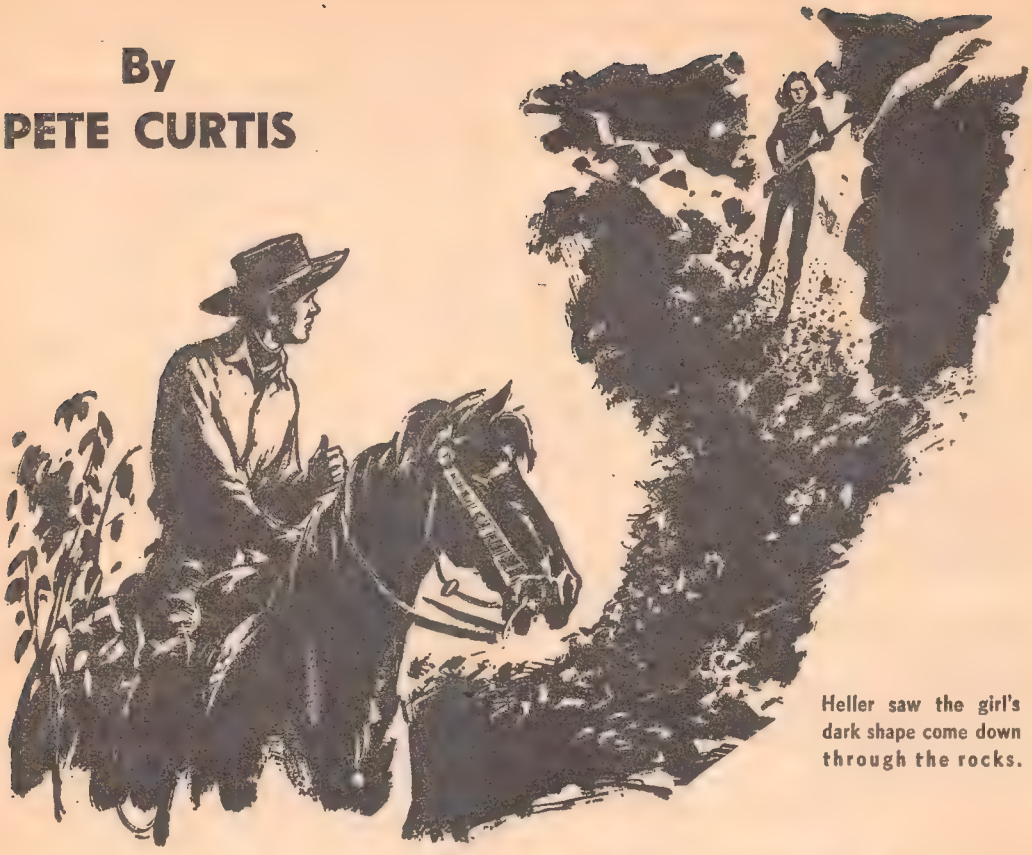


Heller saw the girl's dark shape come down through the rocks.

THE SILENT GUN

When a man had found what he wanted in life, could he risk it all for a friend?

IN DEEPENING dusk George Heller rode into the Circle Cross ranch yard. Passing the open door of the mess shack, he had a look at the crew seated at the long table. The kitchen and a back room of the main house were ablaze with light. As Heller rode forward, he saw Mark Cole step out of the kitchen and stand waiting on the porch.

Cole said, "Evening, George," and leaned his chunky frame against a porch post.

Heller dismounted and walked to the stoop, unbuttoning a shirt pocket. He took out a roll of paper and counted off a precise amount. He handed the shucked bills to Cole. "The last payment for those cows," he said. "Thanks again, Mark."

Cole nodded and asked, "Had supper?"

"At my place," Heller replied.

"Come in for coffee then."

Heller crossed the porch, doffed his stetson, and stepped into the kitchen behind Cole. He was a half head taller than the Circle Cross owner, built along slender lines with long arms and large hands, and no one in Sunup Basin had ever seen him pack a gun. His residence in the Basin

was not long; he had drifted in one day and the next thing folks knew he was running the old Bar U outfit in the Big Buck Hills.

The ranch had been a sorry affair when he'd bought it, but long hours of hard work were starting to make it pay off. Heller was experiencing a pleasurable sense of accomplishment which gave him complete inner satisfaction. Mark Cole was a neighbor who went out of his way to be helpful, and Heller was not forgetting it; the two men had become extremely good friends. The life Heller had found in Sunup Basin was proof enough to him that his forsaking the wolf existence of his past ways was a wise and soul-profiting move.

Cole's handsome wife and equally appealing daughter, Linda, were at the kitchen sink washing dishes, and Heller's eyes quickly sought out Linda. Yet the feeling he derived, when their eyes met, was not the quiet, strange excitement he had come to expect whenever they first caught sight of each other.

"Hello, George," she said quite soberly, a settled expression of pensiveness around her mouth corners. Heller was immediately struck by her grave manner.

Mrs. Cole offered him a brief, but pleasant, smile, then said, "You should have come down for supper, George. Could be you're getting a mite tired of your own cooking."

"My Mexican hand is pretty good at it, Mrs. Cole, but all he cooks is chili beans."

The response to his quip was somewhat artificial. There was something definitely wrong here; the habitually warm friendliness of Mrs. Cole, which had always made him feel more than welcome, was not wholly in evidence this evening. These people were troubled, withdrawn.

A shadowed expression came to his eyes. His weather-dark features were quietly reminiscent of an Indian's, smoothed, now, with watchful uncertainty. He had the feeling his past had caught up with him here in Sunup Basin. Well, it was bound to happen, sooner or later, he supposed. A man with a gun-rep, who was known in many far corners of a wide land, could not lose himself to the world forever. Yet he had done nothing special to conceal his reputation; he had simply rode to this range and bought a ranch under his own name, a man with a desire to get closer to the finer things of life.

"Sit there at the table, George," said Mark Cole.

And he sat, a careful guest, a little on the defensive. He was thinking darkly of Boyd Hink, the professional gunman who had ridden into the Basin two months ago and hired out to the big Guy Tendry spread. Hink had been in Colorado a spell, in Trinidad, where he, Heller, had run one of the biggest casinos—the Jack of Diamonds. Hink, however, as did most everybody else beyond the Basin, knew him by another name. A name pinned on him years ago by some poetically inclined character, and the name had stuck with him.

Heller mused, Hink must have spotted me here without my knowing, and unlimbered his tongue.

MARK COLE poured two coffees, and as Heller stirred in sugar and canned milk, Cole voiced, "Guess you've heard about Luce."

The man's somber demeanor evidenced a personal problem, for Luce was Mark Cole's son.

Heller, shaking his head, felt his backbone lose some of its starch. He said, "I've been too confined to my own boundaries to hear much of anything."

Cole's ruddied face sobered expressively as he drew in a harsh breath. "Luce is in a tight. Got into a hassel with that Boyd Hink who rides for Tendry. Tendry and me have been wrangling for years over valley graze dividing our outfits—you've heard about it? Well, that's what all the fuss was about between Luce and Hink. Now they're going to have it out tomorrow morning in Rawhide. Eight o'clock is the time set."

Heller was relieved that he was not the cause of the gloomy atmosphere under the Cole roof. More than likely, Hink did not

know yet that he was ranching in this territory. But he at once understood the dismay of the Cole family. Boyd Hink had hired out his gun and now he had made his first play. Sure as anything, he'd thrown out poisoned bait to young Luce and the kid snapped it up.

"Hink's a gunslinger," Heller drawled quietly. "Didn't your boy know that?"

"It's been hinted at," said Mark Cole. "Time and again I've warned Luce to keep a cool head, to let me handle this trouble we're having with Tendry, but now—" His hands made a hopeless gesture, then the lamplight broke against his eyes and he looked sharply at Heller. "You talk of Hink with certain knowledge. Maybe you know how good he is with a gun?"

Heller lifted his broad shoulders. "I've never seen him use one. He's got a reputation. That usually means something."

Cole's wife and Linda had stopped momentarily from their chores to listen. Worry and anxiety naturally etched the lines on Mrs. Cole's face, and Linda's concern was likewise apparent, yet, of a sudden, there was a kind of blazing light in her fine eyes as she stared intently at Heller.

He attempted to read that bright, burning look, but coming from this girl, who invariably and subtly awoke within him the desire for fatherhood, he was on uncertain ground. On a man's face, the expression would have been one of pure fight and determination.

Mark Cole had slumped forward with elbows propped on the table, his brow deeply furrowed. "I see no way out of this," he muttered with sorry head-shakings. "My wife wants him to back out. Even if I agreed to such a thing, Luce wouldn't do it. He knows this Basin country would label him yellow."

Mrs. Cole snapped, "I don't believe such a thing. Why should anyone be made out yellow because he refuses to let some killer shoot him down? Mr. Heller, would you call Luce yellow if he didn't face that man?"

His eyes swung from Linda to meet Mrs. Cole's anguished gaze, and he kept his voice gentle. "No, ma'am, I would not. Others might not let him live it down, though. In the end, he would have to leave Sunup Basin."

The distraught woman shook her head uncomprehendingly and turned to her work, and Heller looked back to Linda's grim, sun-tinted face. There was something so very tense about her that he felt a wondering uneasiness.

Mark Cole said abruptly, "Know what Luce is doing, George? He's in his room, practicing his draw. Trying to make himself into another Jack Diamond."

Heller shot his friend a hooded look. "Is that bad—or good?"

"Why, I'd say good. Diamond's no killer, from what I've heard. When a man's braced, he's got to fight. Luce is an example. Sure, he should have been more discreet with that gunslick—"

Linda broke in with fight in her voice. "Oh, I've seen Boyd Hink strutting around town, as though he owned it and everybody in it!"

"There's always a chance," Cole muttered, unmindful of his daughter. "If a fella—"

"For goodness sake, Mark," Mrs. Cole's distressed voice interrupted. "I wish you'd stop this kind of talk."

AN UNEASY silence settled over the room, and Heller felt keenly the gravity of the moment. His fondness for this family, who had accepted and befriended him at face value, was never more poignant than now. A roiling restlessness took hold of him when he pictured the clean-cut, flax-haired Luce in his room priming himself for combat, and foreboding touched Heller and left him with a helpless anger and sadness. He had the feeling Luce Cole was spending his last night in the loving bosom of his family.

As usual, Linda, working dispiritedly with the last of the dishes, magnetically drew his gaze. Earlier his intentions had been to invite her for a horseback ride under the stars, a pastime they had both delighted in when together, but certainly

not tonight.

Mrs. Cole began to sweep the floor with movements mechanical and unstudied. Heller couldn't take the air of gloom any longer. He stood up and got his stetson off the wall peg. Linda managed a small smile, and said quietly, "Goodnight, George."

Mark Cole followed him out to the porch, and there the two men solemnly parted. Heller left Mark Cole standing in the porch shadows as he cantered his horse out to the road. He soon left the road for a snaking trail, just riding. The black sky was star-dusted and the crisp night wind eased his dark feelings somewhat. The yonder cry of a coyote struck through the whispers of a lonesome land.

He rode aimlessly for a long time, and finally his horse brought him to the crest of a small hill. To the east, on the purple flats, he saw the winking lights of Rawhide. He halted his pony and rolled a cigarette.

He knew that a suppressed excitement would hold sway in the town, that talk about the coming gunplay tomorrow morning would be endless. And down there Boyd Hink and his boss, Guy Tendry, and Tendry's crew would hold the town in their grip this night.

He recalled Boyd Hink as a thin-featured man with sardonic eyes, a wolf who was proud of his kills. And when he compared this immobile killer to Luce Cole, the lad no doubt working intensely at his draw this very moment, he shook his head at the incongruous set-up. Yet the cards had been dealt and the hand had to be played.

Breathing forth a heated word, he circled back to the road and started for home. He let his pony have its head and later spanked by Mark Cole's layout. An easy distance ahead was his own Bar U fork which would take him into the Big Buck Hills. Past his fork lay Guy Tendry's outsized spread and others of lesser renown.

His chin lifted alertly. Near a rocky shoulder to his fore he thought he had caught sight of a stray movement in the starlight's faint light. His eyes narrowed and the old wariness cut coldly through him; but that was replaced with puzzlement and surprise. He'd had only a glimpse of the person close by the shoulder, yet that was all he'd needed to guess who it was.

When he breasted the rock outcroppings, he halted and called, "Come out, Linda. If I'd been Boyd Hink, I'd have shot first and looked later."

Long moments trailed by before he saw the girl's dark shape move down through the rocks. The rifle she carried did not appear to be altogether strange in her hands. Her hair was the lightest part about her in these shadows; its flared abundance was what had given her identity away to Heller.

"George, I thought maybe you were—"

"Boyd Hink, I reckon," he opined softly. "You've had this crazy notion in your head since you saw the Tendry crew pass the house earlier, haven't you?"

She was at the right stirrup now, her face upturned. "I'll not let him kill Luce! I'm good enough with this rifle to cripple Boyd Hink so he won't be able to fight. Luce hasn't a chance to-morrow, George. You know that!" Her words tumbled one over the other.

He was stirred enormously by the girl, her spunk and fire shaking him to his boot toes, and he wanted to reach down and take her up to his chest to still the wild and cruel emotions which had brought her skulking into the night with a firearm.

His voice was gentle but prodding. "There won't be Tendry traffic along this road tonight, Linda. They'll stay in town. You could have fetched a bullet for pulling a stunt like this. Now go home. You should be with your folks."

The spark in her eyes diminished. "I guess I've acted like a fool." She reached up and, where his hands rested on the saddle horn, her fingers made firm pressure. Then she turned away, sighing, and headed back through the rocks. Halfway along she paused to look back. "Don't worry, George. I'll go home." The dense black of rock and brush swallowed her.

Her pony's hoofs made a fugitive stirring in the night. Heller sat his horse quietly and listened to the fading echoes. And then the night was still, and the wind fluttered his neckerchief and sighed in the pines at the foot of the Big Buck Hills. For a long spell Heller lingered there, absolutely motionless, his mind reaching out for something. At last, he lifted reins and passed on.

BRILLIANT morning sunlight lay across Rawhide's weather-drab buildings. In the quarter hour preceding eight o'clock George Heller entered the town by a northern route, staying clear of the main street. He left his pony at the rear of the livery stable and stepped into the cool, hay-smelling murkiness of the big barn. There was an addition to Heller that Rawhide had not seen previously. A bone-handled Colt .45 was holstered low on his right hip.

Under the archway a lone, stoop-shouldered man stood with his attention drawn up-street.

Heller quietly walked the length of the runway before Dad Finny heard him. Dad swiveled his head in surprise. "Howdy, Mr. Heller. Almost time now. You got any bets riding?"

"No, Dad, I haven't."

"Well—there's Hink by the saloon, cool as ice. Luce Cole ain't come in as yet."

Heller nodded and let his gaze stray over the riders along either walk. Most of these men would seek some kind of shelter when the big hand of the clock pointed straight up.

Boyd Hink was leaning in a disdainfully relaxed manner against a board awning post of the saloon, thumbs hooked to gunbelt, a half smoked cigarette drooping from a mouth corner. He looked much the same as Heller remembered him in Trinidad. Behind him Guy Tendry and his riders lined the boardwalk.

Then Dad Finny's raspy voice echoed, "Here come the Coles!"

Heller swung his gaze. The clear-skinned Luce Cole, straight-backed in saddle, was flanked by his father. The two rode past the livery with stony countenances, followed by Circle Cross riders who appeared a sober looking lot.

Heller stepped back into the dusky light. "Dad, come here a minute, will you?"

Dad Finny had a perplexed cast to his eyes when he complied. Heller said, "A silver eagle for a short errand," and he placed the coin in the old man's right palm. "When Luce Cole gets afoot, I want you to go to Boyd Hink and tell him there's a gent standing in front of the livery who's calling his hand. Tell him this gent is taking up the fight for the Circle Cross. That's all, Dad. He'll understand."

Disbelief streaked Dad Finny's grizzled cheeks. "You want me to walk up to Boyd Hink and say that—now?"

"Just ease along the walk, say your piece, and skedaddle."

The firm tone of the voice, the hard look in the eyes of George Heller prompted Dad Finny to nod soundlessly.

"One other thing," Heller added with cold, warning tones. "Once you tell him, forget about what you've said or done."

Finny's rheumy eyes blinked nervously. The two men moved to where they could watch the street again.

Mark Cole and his son had halted their crowd diagonally across from the livery. Up the street, Boyd Hink still shouldered the awning post with an indifferent attitude, as though oblivious to everything except the warming goodness of the morning sun.

Now there was a continual shifting of positions by the onlookers, most seeking the cover of recessed doorways and corners of buildings.

Heller's alert eyes saw Mark Cole pull out his watch. Luce Cole's shoulders lifted as a long breath was drawn in. When Luce swung down from the saddle and stood while he took a hitch at his gunbelt, Heller murmured, "All right, Dad."

Dad Finny jerked stiff-jointedly into motion. His feet scuffed up dust, and then he was under the wood awnings, moving quickly along the board walk, his face lowered.

LUCE COLE started his slow walk to the middle of the street.

Heller's eyes swung swiftly toward Dad Finny again, beyond him to Boyd Hink.

Hink made a half turn of his head, as though young Luce's solitary movement into the street had interrupted his meditations.

Heller saw the hardcase straighten with languid action, flick his cigarette to the dust. Then Dad Finny was at Boyd Hink's side, and Heller saw the quick swivel of Hink's head toward Finny as the old man's mouth worked with talk. Hink's eyes followed the retreating, humped back of Finny, and the incident must have plainly startled him, although Heller was the only one to assume this. A motionless long moment passed before Hink's head came slowly around and the eyes looked out to the livery.

George Heller watched with a calculated interest. He wasn't at all sure how Boyd Hink would react. Although the challenge brought the gunswift to the crossroads of life and death, Heller was not well enough acquainted with the man's personality to know which trail he was likely to choose.

He watched Hink's harsh-boned face, and the distance was too great to observe the tracings of expression. But obviously there was riot in the man's mind. To be suddenly braced by a gunfighter of Jack Diamond's caliber, and in a town hundreds of miles from where Diamond was last known to have operated, was enough to give pause to the most confident and iron-willed of men.

Ignoring Luce Cole completely now, Hink continued to eye Heller with a long and measuring scrutiny. The man's animal alertness came across to Heller, and his thin shoulders began to sway from some inner conflict.

Heller knew indecision gripped Hink. Undoubtedly the man faced a momentous step in his life, one that could enhance or shatter the meaning of his way of living. The kind of stuff he was made of would give the answer.

And the answer was an abrupt pivoting by Boyd Hink, placing his back on Heller and Luce Cole. In long-legged strides, he went directly to his racked pony; and while the town looked on unbelieving, he swung to saddle and rode out of Rawhide.

George Heller, alias Jack Diamond, knew that Sunup Basin had seen the last of Boyd Hink. When Mark Cole rushed out to his stunned boy and threw his arms around him, and when one man said to another as they hurried past the livery, "Luce sure called that gent's bluff," Heller retreated to his horse, his lips stretched tight by a grim smile.

Featured Next Month

LOOT OF THE DIABLOS

A Fast-Moving Jim Hatfield Novel

By JACKSON COLE

Card hit the fat man savagely

HOAG'S STATION

By W. J. REYNOLDS

THE east Texas spring was late. The first two weeks of March brought sleet, snow and rain, the whole accompanied by cutting northers. The creeks left their banks and backed into the lowlands while roads twisting through the timber were belly-deep to a mule, and under water in the low places. Where the mixed dirt merged into the blackland prairies the mud, except when it was pouring rain and too thin to stick, balled and solidly locked the wheels of any vehicle venturing upon them so that every few hundred feet the wheels had to be punched, scraped and cursed free of the mud. It was back-breaking work.

It was in a time like this that Tag and Ben Boney chose to rob the Blackjack bank. During the holdup they had to shoot the cashier, then went splattering and lunging out of town on their grain-fed horses toward the heavily timbered bottoms with nine thousand dollars in a sack and a .44 bullet fired by the dying cashier

Deputy Bill Card was methodically trailing a pair of killers when up popped the devil and one very lovely lady in distress

in Ben.

The posse, led by Blackjack's deputy sheriff, Bill Card, lost the trail five miles out of Blackjack in a driving rain. About all the posse could do then was scatter, quarter the country, questioning isolated farmers and cattlemen, seeking a lead.

Four days later and five miles east of Hoag's Station in Big Muddy, Bill Card hunkered over a small fire, sheltered from the raw east wind and drizzle of rain by an elm laced with wild grape vines. His worn-out horse stood humped, tail to wind and rain, nearby. He had been here since an hour after daylight—it was noon now—waiting for the Jefferson-Blackjack stage. He was reasonably certain it had not passed before, even though it would be nine days out of Jefferson and five days behind regular schedule.

Thirty minutes later it crawled into view out of the timber, the six mules floundering along knee- to belly-deep in the slushy mud. The stage was a light wagon with three spring seats spaced along its bed and with a wagon sheet drawn tautly over its bows. The mules, even with this light load, were already tired.

The stage drew even with Bill Card and the mules stopped without order from Tobe Stout, the driver, and twisted long ears hopefully backward.

Tobe said to his passengers, "We'll stop for a pot of coffee, folks. I'll feed the mules, you grab some of that fire."

Three men and a woman left the stage to pick their way to Bill Card's fire while he slogged to the stage.

"Howdy, Tobe. You aren't raising hardly any dust this trip."

Tobe Stout said a short pungent word, then grinned at Bill Card, his teeth white in his wind-reddened face stubbled with a black beard.

"Bill, why I keep on driving this contraption is a constant wonder to me."

Bill Card began slipping bits from the mules' mouths while Tobe filled nosebags.

"You're too lazy to work, Tobe," Bill Card said. "So you do four men's work driving this stage to take it easy." He grinned. "But good times are ahead. You'll be safe and snug at Hoag's tonight. Likely you'll have to lay over and wait for the Big Muddy to run down."

At mention of Hoag's, Tobe repeated his pungent word. "That hogpen! It would have to be Hoag at that place."

"That's the reason he picked the place, Tobe. Extra business, extra dollars."

"A damned hog in a hogpen," Tobe said. He rubbed impatiently at the water tickling through his beard stubble. "I've got cargo for Hoag this trip."

"Some rare and costly luxury for his forced guests, no doubt."

"Son," Tobe said, "you say that in jest, and in a manner calculated to be uncomplimentary to Mr. Hoag, but you hit it. That's her yonder."

Card sent a surprised glance toward the woman beside the fire, a bulky shape in a heavy, hooded cape. "Another one?"

"Another one." Tobe's grin was malicious. "Looks like a lanky crane about your size could find matrimony, Bill, if a hog like Hoag can find one every two-three years!"

Card said, "Give me time, Tobe. I'm just a young'un yet, not turned thirty."

"From the look of that beat-up horse there, you're learning. Who you chasing, Bill?"

Bill Card told him about the robbery. "Ben was bleeding when they lit out," he said, "but the rain soon ruined that sign and the tracks. But I'm pretty sure I found the right pair of holes in the mud yesterday morning. Real close together like the horses would have been if Tag had been holding Ben up. Those horses went into Big Muddy and I haven't found a thing this side yet."

"You figuring to ride with me, Bill?"

Card said, "Yes. And don't mention what I've just told you, Tobe."

Tobe started to speak, looked closely at Bill Card and kept his peace.

They finished putting the nosebags on the mules, then Tobe got a coffee pot from the wagon box, measured in coffee and filled the pot from a clear puddle beyond the road. They slogged over to the fire.

As Tobe raked out a bed of coals and set the pot on them, he said, "Folks, meet Bill Card, deputy sheriff from Blackjack. Bill, this lady is Shelly Vesper, on her way to wed Ed Hoag. This gentleman is Dr. Wellyn who plans to set up in Blackjack, and these other gentlemen are Mr. Hardesty, flour, and Mr. Cain, farm machinery."

Deputy Card nodded, lifting his hat to Shelly Vesper, then shook the hand that Dr. Wellyn extended. But his mind was on the woman. She had pushed back the hood of her cape a bit and with his first good look at her he realized that some of his shock must show on his face.

Shelly Vesper was young, twenty-five maybe, and had big gray eyes and wide, composed lips. Her nose was straight, and her upswinging brows were the same crow-wing black as her hair. Her head would come about to the top of his shirt pocket. Her cool glance upon him now also held some controlled emotion close to defiance.

Bill Card laid more branches on the fire, building it up. They made a small circle around it, holding out cold, reddened hands to the heat. Tobe returned to the wagon for a string of tin cups on a wire, and when the coffee had boiled he poured and passed Shelly Vesper the first cup.

Bill Card took his cup and moved aside. Shelly Vesper paused beside him, her upslanting regard striking him solidly.

"You, too?" she murmured.

Bill had himself in hand now and he gave her his white grin, not pretending to misunderstand her. "Just disapponted, ma'am. That puts you out of circulation, and there are not many pretty women here."

The gallantry brought a quick smile and lent warmth to her eyes, making her beautiful. "Thank you, Mr. Card. That's one way to evade the question and answer it at the same time. You know Mr. Hoag well then?"

"No. Just seen him a few times."

She considered that and the strict attention he gave his coffee. Finally she said, "I don't really expect much, Mr. Card. Just decency and a home. I've made my way for three years since my husband was killed in a mining accident. It's no easy task for a woman who at the same time wants to keep her self-respect."

"I can imagine that, ma'am."

"Mr. Hoag says he owns his home and makes a living from it, and that he is lonely and needs a companion—that that will be sufficient. I'll hold up my end and perhaps we shall both benefit. Could that be, Mr. Card?"

There was a gusty rage in Bill Card, and he could not look at her. He drained his cup and tossed the grounds away. "We'll be there tonight, ma'am."

"Thank you for the loan of your ear, Mr. Card!"

He had hurt her with his rebuff, and this increased his rage at Ed Hoag. "I'm sorry, ma'am," he said. "I'll go help Tobe with the mules." He moved away with relief, conscious of her steady regard on his back.

As Bill Card and Tobe Stout removed the nosebags and rebridled the mules, Card asked, "Tobe, hasn't anybody told her about Hoag?"

"Did you?"

"No." Bill buckled a throat latch and moved to the next mule. "It's a sorry situation, Tobe."

"Yes. Still, she's not married yet. And its none of my business. Nor yours."

The stage pulled into Hoag's station at dusk. As the passengers left the stage, Bill Card slanted a glance at Shelly Vesper, taking her first look at what was to be her future home. Her eyes were shadowed and her face appeared stiff.

Card surveyed the station with the same distaste which it always aroused in him when he had occasion to see it. In a country filled with timber with which any man with a little selection and care could build any number of tight barns and corrals or houses, Hoag's barn was constructed of different kinds of logs, crooked or straight. The crib had huge gaps because of warped logs, and the six stalls, three to a side, were closed in with up-

right willow poles, rotted and patched and full of holes. The fence of the corral, adjoining the barn, was a patchwork of wire, brush and sagging logs.

The house, despite its having a second story, could only be called a hovel, a mean one at that. The first floor was built of logs, with the second, seemingly added as an afterthought, of split cottonwood and willow, so warped that a twenty-pound raccoon could easily get through the cracks. Beyond the kitchen door, at the side of the house were many years' collection of bones from the kitchen, which had been regularly wetted down with slops.

A huge man with a sagging belly appeared in the doorway to call:

"Come in, folks."

An old breed named Zack came silently from the barn and began to unhook the mules.

Bill Card said, "Zack, see that my horse gets a double ration of corn," tramped to the house and went inside.

Ed Hoag who had turned already was inside with the others, wheeled to face Bill Card with lowered head and a hard stare that held no friendliness. His thick lips in his shaven red face were flat.

His voice struck with a pushing belligerance. "What are you doing here, Card?"

"Horse played out," Bill said mildly. "Riding with Tobe. Your welcome overwhelms me, Ed."

"You'll sign no charge slips here. Cash."

"You going to throw me out, Ed?"

For a moment, Bill Card thought Hoag would try, but some secret thought smeared the bulky man's stare and he headed for the kitchen doorway. "Supper'll be ready in a few minutes," he flung back at them.

Shelly Vesper's eyes were shadowed in the light from the bracketed lamp, but her gaze was a pressure upon the deputy. Dr. Wellyn smiled at Bill Card.

"Thought for a moment that my first patients would be on the county, Mr. Card!"

"Ed's a great one for playing," Bill Card said.

Shortly, Tobe Stout came in, grunting under Shelly Vesper's trunk, and dropped it near the door. "Here's your trunk, Miss Vesper. I'll put it where you want it later."

"Thank you."

Ed Hoag came quickly out of the kitchen, his feet heavy in a flat-footed slapping, his pushing stare seeking out Shelly.

"Did you say Vesper?" he asked Tobe, and to the girl, "Are you Shelly Vesper?"

"Yes."

Ed Hoag seemed to settle, then swell with instant fury. "You're a runt! You said you was strong. You lied to me!" His voice rose brutally. "I won't have a whining, whimpering female here! You lied!"

She was stiff under the cape. "I said strong, Mr. Hoag, not big. There's a difference."

"A lying woman is a lazy, whining woman! I won't have it!"

Bill Card said mildly, "What did *you* tell *her*, Ed?"

Ed Hoag wheeled on him. Shelly said calmly, "We can just call the whole thing off."

"You bet we'll call it off!" Ed Hoag shouted. "And you'll pay for your meals and lodgings here like the rest! And you owe me twelve cents postage for the letters I wasted on you! Pay that, too!"

"I shall," she said. "Add it to the bill for lodgings."

Hoag stood lowering and full of fury and not satisfied. Bill Card moved to Shelly and said softly, "Warm enough here, ma'am, without the damp cape."

She undid the fastening, and he shot a malicious glance at Hoag as he lifted off the cape. She stood compact and square-shouldered in her tight-bodiced gray dress, her raven-black hair shining and smooth as she turned her head to give Bill Card a brief smile of thanks.

Hoag was staring at her as if someone had kicked him in the belly. Dr. Wellyn was watching Hoag with the same malicious smile Bill Card was wearing.

Hoag slowly lost his glare, the rage draining out of him before some other rising emotions. He licked his thick lips twice before words came.

"Well," he finally said apologetically, "I reckon I'm just wrought up today. I say a bargain is a bargain and ought to be kept. I'll stay with mine. Come on into the kitchen, Shelly, and get used to it. We'll talk marrying after supper!" He showed strong wide teeth in a stallion's grin and licked his lips again.

"She's had a tough trip," Bill Card protested.

Ed Hoag's face lowered again, and his eyes riveted on Bill Card. "Card, you've used up your yap here. Don't push your luck!"

Bill Card faced him, and said softly, "Throw me out, Ed."

Hoag breathed heavily with his contained fury, then again some secret thought seemed to hold him and he turned away to enter the kitchen. Slowly, Card began stuffing his pipe.

"With your permission, ma'am?" he said to Shelly.

She nodded, and he thought her shadowed face looked strained. Embarrassed and humiliated. She turned a little and when the light struck her face more strongly he saw that she was thoroughly and wholly angry, too.

"I can see now," she said, "why he had to send away for a wife."

"You were the third one," Bill Card said. "He's worked two to death."

"Bill," Tobe Stout said, "Ed is no man to fool with."

Shelly Vesper said shortly, "At least Mr. Card had the decency to speak up and not cower before that—that man."

"All right," Tobe said. "But we've got to stay here two days even with luck."

"The county will bury me, Tobe," Bill Card said.

Ed Hoag came lunging back into the room, rage congesting his face. He shouted at Shelly Vesper, "I told you to come into the kitchen, not gab with that nosey deputy! By God, you've got something to learn!"

"You both broke it off, Ed. You have no right to shout at her now!"

"Don't tell me who I can—"

Bill Card hit him savagely on the jaw.

Ed Hoag was a big man but the blow felled him. He lay on the mud-caked floor for a minute, then came up on all fours and kept shaking his head. He lifted rage-wild eyes at Bill Card as he came up with surprising speed.

Card stepped aside and hit him again, brutally behind the ear. Hoag stayed down then. They all stood silently waiting until shortly Hoag stirred and finally sat up. Old Zack sidled into the room, watching with glittery Indian eyes.

Finally Ed Hoag made it to his feet and stood staring at Bill Card. He was raging inside but some weight was upon him and when he spoke it was quietly.

"Your badge won't protect you for this, Card."

Quietness in Hoag was enough to raise the hackles on more than one neck, but Bill Card said as quietly, "I don't claim my badge as protection, Ed. But maybe I'd better lock you in one of your outhouses to keep from having to kill you."

Hoag didn't appear to move but Card sensed the stiffening in him. The brutal rage was again fought down. He turned slowly and slapped toward the kitchen.

"We'll find a time, Card," he promised.

"Mr. Stout," Dr. Wellyn said to Tobe, "will you bring in my trunks? I have surgical instruments and books in them that I would prefer to protect from more wetting."

"Sure, I'll get them now, Doctor."

Ed Hoag had paused in the kitchen doorway, watching Dr. Wellyn. Old Zack too, was watching, and started to sidle for the outside door.

Hoag said, "Zack, come in here and help me."

"But, Ed, I got some chores—"

"Damn you, do what I tell you!" Hoag looked at Dr. Wellyn. "You a cutting doctor?"

"I'm a surgeon, Mr. Hoag."

"Well, reckon we need one around here. Zack!" Zack sidled reluctantly into the kitchen. "Come on in to supper when you're ready, folks."

Supper was a silent affair and eaten almost grimly. The pork was warmed over,

which process seemed to have congealed the old grease in it, the cornbread was cold and its crumbliness revealing the fact that it had been cooked yesterday. But with the exception of Shelly Vesper who merely poked at her food, it was all eaten. They didn't linger at the table but straggled back into the main room to the fire. Occasionally, from the kitchen, they could hear Ed Hoag's angry rumble and old Zack's sullen, brief rejoinder.

When Hoag, with the sullen Zack in tow, returned to the main room, Dr. Wellyn said, "Mr. Hoag, if you will show us our beds, I'm sure Miss Vesper also would like to retire."

"Got two rooms," Hoag said, not without satisfaction. "The woman one, and the rest of you can double up in the other. Card can sleep with the hogs."

Bill Card smiled a little. "I'm in the right place then, Ed. I take it you will be around close for company?"

Hoag drew a gusty breath before he turned up the stairs with a short, "Come on." They all followed him, except for Zack and Bill Card. Ed Hoag stopped at the head of the stairs and sent a sharp glance at Zack. Then Hoag pointed.

"Men take the east room, the woman the other." He turned and came back down.

Bill Card was grunting a big backlog into the fireplace. Hoag growled, "You don't need no more fire. Bedtime."

"Long as I sleep here without a bed, I need cover. This is it. All right, Ed?" Bill Card's eyes were gray and bright.

Hoag turned away with a sour grunt and a sharp glance brought old Zack to heel. Both disappeared into the adjoining room. Card could hear Zack's low sibilants, then Hoag's furious snarl. Then silence. Bill Card found a ragged quilt over a barrel chair, spread it before the fire and lay down, puffing thoughtfully on his pipe.

He had always taken it for granted that old Zack slept in the barn, which would be Ed Hoag's opinion of something plenty good for a breed. It didn't seem reasonable for Ed to keep Zack underfoot as he was doing now. Now since he'd found out that Wellyn was a doctor.

Bill Card knocked the dottle from his pipe and lay back on the quilt. Now that he thought of it, the Boneys, the robbers he was after, were part Indian.

The rain stopped shortly after they had gone to bed, and with the dawn was a clear sky and sunlight. The wind was just a breeze from the south, and warm. Gloomy spirits rose with the warming sunshine.

At mid-morning, Tobe Stout said, "Bill, we can make it tomorrow if you'll ride ahead to see that the bridges are there. Water's going down."

"I'll do that," Bill said.

He curried and brushed his horse and hung his saddle blanket out to dry. Old Zack did the chores, then spent the morning piddling about the barn and house under the constant surveilance of Ed Hoag. The old man seemed uncommonly fidgety for an Indian.

"What's biting on you, Zack?" Card asked just before noon.

Zack gave him a glittery stare and only grunted.

After the noon meal, Card strolled out to the barn, conscious that Ed Hoag managed to be near the kitchen window or door. Finally, puffing his pipe, he strolled casually for the timber behind the station.

The kitchen door slapped, and Card glanced toward it. Ed Hoag stood just outside the door, a shotgun slanted in his hands, his head lowered toward Bill Card like an angry bull.

"You're not prowling my place, Card," Ed Hoag said. "You pay for the privilege of the house and horse barn and that's all."

"Add another fifty cents for a stroll in the woods, Ed."

The hammers of the shotgun made distinct clicks as they came to cock.

"I won't tell you again," Hoag said, his voice squeezed thin.

Bill Card was completely still. Death was a tangible thing, about to engulf him. That Ed Hoag would kill him, without twice thinking about it, was sure.

Bill Card turned carefully. "All right, Ed."

Hoag went back into the kitchen, and Card strolled around front and stood leaning against a porch column. The palms of his hands were damp with sweat.

Shelly came out to stand beside him. Her small, square shoulders were stiff and her eyes were bright and angry. "I saw him, and heard. Is he crazy, Mr. Card?" Her shoulders moved a little. "It frightens me to think of what I nearly got into!"

He looked at her. "You've fully decided to leave here then?"

"Yes. Can I get work in Blackjack?"

"I'm sure of it. Can you sew?"

"Yes. I'm pretty good, but not expert."

"Coster and Bramley handle a lot of women's wear. They make most of it themselves and, I believe, supply one or two stores at the county seat. They employ several women part and full time. Coster is a friend of mine. I'll speak to him for you."

He felt the impact of her upslanted glance. "I'm grateful to you. But I seem to get deeper in your debt all the time."

"It's a pleasure, ma'am."

"I wish we were leaving today. I'm afraid of that man. Afraid for you. One moment he seems ready to murder, then the next he seems afraid of you. He isn't a coward, really, is he?"

Bill Card shook his head. "I don't think so. He's killed one man since he's been here and nearly beat three more to death. Ed is looking out for some interest of his. When he isn't he'll jump me quick enough."

"You'll be careful?"

"I'll do that, ma'am."

Bill Card slept in front of the fireplace again that night, and again, Ed Hoag took Zack into his room.

Card had jogged the fire three times, and had just fallen to sleep afterwards when he woke suddenly. The fire was low, but burning with enough heat to keep him warm so that wasn't what had awakened him.

Moving only his eyes, he felt the warm metal of his pistol beside him, and waited. Then a shadow by the door moved to Hoag's room, and as silently went on into the kitchen. It was Zack. After a minute, Bill heard the faint whisper of the outside door in the kitchen.

Bill Card lay there for ten minutes. He had at once ruled out any attempt to follow Zack. The old man was all Indian now, and in his youth, Zack had claimed the status of a warrior.

Finally Card sat up and set about building up the fire. It would be daylight in another hour. He was just throwing on a last log when Ed Hoag came lunging out of his room, eyes wild in the leaping light of the fire. He stopped, staring at Bill.

"You wake up full of energy like that every morning, Ed?" Card drawled.

"You see Zack?"

"Not since I been up," Bill Card said. "Gone, huh?"

Hoag was full of rage at Zack and yet that rage lacked drive. Something else kept Ed Hoag subdued. He could be scared, Bill thought.

Hoag lunged outside and Bill heard him heading for the barn. Twice he called old Zack. After awhile he came back, started a fire in the kitchen stove and set about getting breakfast. Several times, Bill heard him drop something. Ed Hoag was as nervous as a cat in a doghouse.

The others soon came straggling downstairs and Hoag called them all in to breakfast. It was an even more unsavory meal than usual. The pork was burned outside and raw inside, the biscuits were soggy and scorched and the coffee had been made in old grounds.

"This isn't your day for cooking, Ed," Bill Card commented.

Hoag, who had been reaching for a pan of smoking meat on the stove, whirled with a roar. "Keep your damned lip off me!"

The others at the table went stiff with shocked surprise. Card's gray eyes went dark and hard. "There's a lady present, Ed"

Something seemed to turn Ed Hoag wild. "Lady, hell!" he roared. "Lady, my—"

Bill Card came to his feet. "The meat's burning, Ed."

Ed Hoag snatched the pan off the stove just as the back door slapped open and a man leaped into the room, a long-barreled pistol slanted in his hand. Old Zack sidled in along the wall.

Ed Hoag stood frozen with the pan lifted, Bill Card remained still and the others looked up with forks and cups suspended.

Bill Card instantly recognized the man with the gun. Tag Boney! His slight frame was bent and tense, his face dirty under his scraggly black whiskers, his eyes were the same glittery black as old Zack's.

"You going to invite us to breakfast, Ed?" Tag Boney asked.

"That's fifty cents," Hoag said weakly.

"Well, now!" Tag Boney said. "I've already paid up, Ed, me and Ben. Three days ago. Remember?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Ed Hoag's blustery shout trailed weakly as Tag Boney turned his glittery eyes full on him.

"Don't try to bluff out of this, Ed." Tag Boney said. "It won't hurt for folks to know you hid Ben and me for a cut, seeing as how I'm going to kill you anyhow."

The statement was softly spoken and simple, but its impact on Ed Hoag was like a mule's kick. His face sagged, his eyes became a little crazy. "Why, Tag? Why?"

"There's been a doctor here for two days, and you wouldn't let Zack tell me. You were scared it'd give you away, Ed. Well, no matter now. Ben died an hour ago. Out there in that shack, wet and cold, Ed. Now you die!"

Ed Hoag threw the pan of pork and hot grease full at Tag Boney's face. The pistol roared with a flash of fire and smoke and Hoag reeled as the bullet hit him in the neck. Boney fired again, blindly, as the grease struck him in the face.

Bill Card leaped then. His striking gun broke Boney's wrist and the outlaw's gun fell. Card kept going to hit the lunging Zack with a shoulder and drive him gagging against the wall. Ed Hoag was charging in then, swinging a blunt poker for Boney's head.

Card rammed Hoag off-balance, then hit him behind the ear with his pistol barrel. While Hoag was falling, Card had borne the blinded Tag Boney to the floor and snapped a handcuff on his good wrist and snapped the other end to Zack's leg.

It was explosive action that had consumed only seconds. The others at the table were only now scrambling up.

Card panted, "Doctor, looks like your first patients are on the county!"

Dr. Wellyn drove the second wagon with Ed Hoag, Tag Boney, Zack and the body of Ben Boney. Mr. Cain, farm implements, guarded the prisoners with a loaded shotgun and kept fiddling nervously with the hammers. Bill Card rode his horse ahead of Tobe Stout's stage, feeling out the corduroy road, and the bridges under the belly-deep water. But once the two main channels of the Muddy were crossed and the water left behind, he dropped back beside the wagon.

The wagon sheet had been rolled up and tied, leaving the sides open to allow the sunshine to fall on the passengers. Tobe grinned and winked at Bill Card and rolled his eyes backward. Bill chuckled and hipped around in his saddle to give Shelly Vesper his wide grin.

"You suspected Hoag all the time, didn't you?" she asked Bill.

"Figured the Boneys had to be around some place if I'd been following the right pair of holes in the mud. Horses were close together all the time like they would have been if Tag had been holding Ben in the saddle. Couldn't find any sign across the creek. And Hoag was a greedy man. It added up."

Her eyes were smiling at him. "I'm glad. I wasn't taken out of circulation after all!" Her eyes widened, then she blushed. "Oh! That was an awful thing to say!"

He grinned. "I've been giving that considerable thought. Now I aim to give it considerable attention!"

She was still blushing, but Bill Card had never felt better. It was a wonderfully fine day.

The sheriff faced Prentiss across fifty feet of dark street

Decision At Prairie City

By PHILIP MORGAN

Meredith was one sheriff who believed that a man seldom went so far down the wrong road he couldn't come back

HUGH MEREDITH stopped at the top of the long grade and looked down at the crooked streets of Prairie City. With distinct regret he wished he had not come. But that was a foolish thought and he shrugged it off. As Sheriff of Antelope County, he was expected to keep the peace in the entire county. Prairie City was as far from the county seat as you could get and still be in the county, but it still was within his jurisdiction. And he could no longer ignore the stories that kept flowing into Bent Fork about the things that were going on up here. He had waited too long now, hoping that his old friend, Ben Teacher, would straighten things out. Ben was the marshal of Prairie City. But the word was that Ben had begun to close his eyes to things he should have seen. The word was that Ben had turned crooked.

Moving down the grade, the sheriff went over in his mind what he had heard. Prairie City was now supposed to be

headquarters for Yancey Prentiss and his owlhoot gang. From here they made their raids on the cattle herds in the neighboring counties. They had kept well clear of Antelope County, but they had turned Prairie City into a refuge for crooked gamblers, for painted women, and for men who rode always looking at their back trail. The town would not be given up without a fight. Meredith accepted that fact without emotion. Trouble had been his business for too long for him to begin worrying now about one more fight. What really worried him was Ben Teacher, and the faintly bitter thought came to him that the man who wore the star never had any friends.

COMING onto Prairie City's single street, Hugh Meredith went along it at a walk, alert while seeming to be at ease. Caution was his way of life, and knowing he was on dangerous ground here, his eyes kept up a steady searching of hidden corners and alleyways. Two hard-looking men who were standing in front of the Big Play Saloon glanced up at him curiously, then with a sharper interest. Both suddenly wheeled about and walked quickly into the saloon.

It was mid-day and the town was drowsing, but the word would soon spread that he was here. He smiled grimly. His presence was like a stone thrown into a lake, causing ripples of fear and tension to spread in widening circles through the suspicious inhabitants of a town. And this one would be no different from others.

Finally he drew rein at the far end of the street, in front of the jail and marshal's office. Dismounting, he moved onto the walk and entered the office. Ben Teacher sat behind the desk, dozing in his easy chair. Hugh Meredith stopped a moment, seeing lines from softening and too much liquor in Ben's heavy face.

Then he said softly, "Afternoon, Ben."

Teacher came awake with a start, although for a second his blue eyes had a bad time focusing. When he recognized Sheriff Meredith he smiled weakly.

"Hugh, you old wolf! What brings you up here? Got a warrant to serve?"

Meredith sat down in one of the barrel-backed chairs and pushed back his hat. He regretted what he had to do now and wondered if there was some way to make it easier. He decided there wasn't.

"The folks around this county figure things have been getting a little loose and easy up here, Ben," he said flatly. "They want the town cleaned out. I'm here to do it, and I'll want you to help me."

Teacher was sweating. He asked, "They have anything to say about me?"

"I never listen to talk about my friends," the sheriff said quietly.

Marshal Teacher said, "It won't be easy to close down this town, Hugh. Folks here will probably fight you."

"I've been through it before," Meredith said. "There's always one tough boy. Look for him and break him, and the rest of it is plumb simple. . . . Well, we might as we get started. Get me a shotgun."

Ben started to say something more, changed his mind and shrugged. He went over to the gun rack and took down a shotgun. He brought it to Hugh Meredith and watched silently while the sheriff checked the loads.

Meredith tucked the gun under his arm and walked from the office. Across the street was the Longhorn Saloon, run by Skip Lainson. The lawman went directly across the street and entered the place. It was almost empty at this time of day. A couple of bearded men were playing a desultory game of pitch at a back table. Lainson, a shrewd, barrel-shaped man, was behind the bar. His eyes narrowed as he saw Meredith and he threw one quick, questioning look at Ben Teacher. The sheriff came to a halt in the center of the big room.

"This place is closed, Lainson," he announced. "You'll shut the doors and you won't open up again for two weeks."

"What's the idea, Sheriff?" Lainson shouted loudly. "I haven't done a thing wrong."

"The whole town has become a sinkhole," Meredith replied evenly. "I am closing it down for two weeks. When you

open again, the town will be run decently. If you stay open now, I'll run you out of the county."

He turned without waiting for an answer and marched out of the saloon. Ben Teacher walked stiffly beside him, his face red with anger.

"That was pretty tough, Hugh," Ben said on the walk outside.

"There is no easy way to do it. At the end of two weeks, all of the riff-raff will be gone. The town can be opened up again and order maintained. There's no other way."

LOOKING at Ben Teacher, he saw a man pretty far down the wrong road. There had been a time when Ben had been a good man, fearless and hard. But somewhere he had made a concession to crookedness and then each time it had been a little easier. And every time he had overlooked something he should have dealt with, a little of his respect had faded until now there was none left. And respect and courage always walked hand in hand when a man wore a star.

So now Ben Teacher stood here in his town and watched another man do what he himself should have done long ago. The shame of it must be like gall in his throat, Hugh thought. Maybe if the shame were great enough, Ben would make a play at gaining back some of that lost respect. That was Hugh Meredith's great hope.

They went their rounds thereafter in silence. Teacher's disapproval was unspoken, but plain. They stopped at five bars along Main and they dropped their advice at Big Sally's and Marie's. When they returned to Main, the only place remaining was the Tombstone Saloon, the biggest in Prairie City. It was here that Yancey Prentiss hung out and Hugh had little doubt that the outlaw was there now. It had been two hours since the sheriff had ridden in, and word would long since have been passed to Prentiss. Prentiss was the key to things in Prairie City. The rest of them would watch Prentiss. If he knuckled under, the rest would. But everyone expected him to fight. They expected Hugh's closing order to die in the blast of Yancey Prentiss' gun.

As the two lawmen walked up to the doors of the saloon, Teacher dropped a half pace back of Meredith, who glanced at him sharply.

"Never show a dog like Prentiss any respect, Ben," he advised. "Move up."

Teacher moved up and they went in the doors side by side. Hugh Meredith had been feeling the tension creep into his muscles a little more at each place they had stopped. Now, as he saw Yancey Prentiss leaning against the bar and felt the tight silence of this room, the tension suddenly left him and once more he was cold and alert and sure.

All fear was forgotten in that one brief moment. He glanced quickly around the saloon and saw three others who bore the plain stamp of men who rode the back country. He kept these three in the corner of his vision, but put most of his attention on Yancey Prentiss, believing the others would wait for him to decide the play.

Hugh stopped fifteen paces from Yancey Prentiss. The big outlaw straightened and stood easily on the balls of his feet, his hands hanging loose at his sides. There was a faintly amused expression on his tough face. Meredith spoke to the bartender, but he did not look away from Prentiss.

"The saloon is closed. Don't open up for two weeks."

Prentiss laughed then. "The law's getting awful tough all of a sudden, Sheriff."

Hugh said shortly, "Do you have any objections, Prentiss?"

"None at all," Prentiss said evenly. "You've got to make a show. You come up here and show your importance, then get back on your horse and ride back to the county seat. The boys stay closed today and open again tomorrow. The voters are satisfied and nobody's hurt. No, I don't have any objections."

"I'll be here for two weeks," the sheriff said. " The man who opens before the time limit expires will be run out of town for good."

A small frown creased Prentiss' forehead. He glanced at Ben Teacher. "You better tell him how we do things up here, Marshal. Otherwise somebody's liable to get hurt."

Teacher said heavily, "He's the sheriff. I don't tell him what to do." Hugh had expected a stronger answer from the marshal and some of the hopes he had held for Ben Teacher began to fade.

"You got anything else you'd like to say, Prentiss?" he asked softly. When the man didn't answer, Meredith glanced at the bartender. "Be closed inside an hour."

HE WALKED toward the doors, feeling the skin begin to crawl between his shoulder-blades as he put his back to the outlaw. He heard the marshal clumping along behind him. Just as they reached the door, Yancey Prentiss spoke.

"I think you're bluffing, Sheriff. I'm riding out now, but I'll be back tonight. Don't be here."

The sheriff turned to face him. He said harshly, "Maybe you'd like to try it right now." He had the shotgun shoved forward in his hands, his thumb hooked over the twin hammers. He knew that Prentiss was the answer to all the trouble here. He wished Prentiss *would draw*. But the outlaw wanted nothing to do with that shotgun. Meredith read that in the man's face and felt an instant regret.

"Tonight, Sheriff," Prentiss repeated. "I'll be back tonight."

The sheriff waited another moment, then swung abruptly about and stepped through the swing doors. He went down the street at a fast walk, not waiting for Ben Teacher, not wanting to see the fear that he knew would be in the marshal's soft face. He had hoped to shame the marshal into making a stand against Prentiss and he had failed. Now he felt a stirring of disgust. To let things slip was one thing, but to go completely gutless was another. There was nothing further he could do for Ben Teacher.

In the marshal's office, Meredith hung the shotgun carefully on the rack. Ben came in and dropped wearily into a chair. Hugh Meredith saw shame in the man's face, and sadness. Teacher looked up at him with narrowed eyes.

"You don't have much of an opinion of me, do you, Hugh?"

The sheriff shrugged. "Let it go, Ben."

"No," the marshal said harshly. "I think there are some things you ought to know. You think I've gone yellow and that's all there is to it. Well, maybe you're right, but you'll hear the whole story. Sit down and hear me out." There was a sharp glint in Ben's eyes that reminded Hugh of the Ben Teacher in other days, tougher days. Hugh went around behind the marshal's desk and sat down.

I've been marshal here for twenty years," Ben said softly. "I kept the peace and I've seen the country change and the old days die. The town tamed down finally and I felt pretty good about the job I'd done. I figured I should be in line for a raise. I didn't get a raise. They cut my salary. They said the town was so quiet they didn't need much peace officering any more. I told them it was quiet because I'd made it quiet, like they'd wanted, but they just laughed at me. They'd been plenty eager for me to stay on before, but now they said if I didn't like the job, I could move on. I was fifty-two then, and it was a little late to start learning a new line of work."

He paused while he rolled and lit a cigarette. Meredith had listened quietly and sensed that Teacher was telling the truth. Some of his earlier ideas had suffered a jolt.

He said, "I never figured it was like that, Ben."

"I'm not trying to alibi," the marshal said hastily. "I just wanted you to know how it was. When Prentiss came to town with his boys, he offered me a deal. I'd leave him alone and he'd leave the town alone. He was willing to pay for a place where he wouldn't be bothered. I knew it was all wrong, but I was pretty bitter about the way I'd been treated. I decided it would be a way of getting even. But once you let down the bars, the whole

thing falls apart. I hadn't turned Prentiss down, so the word got around that the town was open. That the marshal could be bought off."

"You don't need to tell me," Meredith said quietly.

"I want to tell it all. Things went from bad to worse and I couldn't even find a stopping point. The town *is* a sink-hole now, and I guess after all the easy decisions and easy money, I lost my nerve. I couldn't do anything about it finally. The town went its own way. Every decent citizen looks down his nose at me, but no one is willing to step in and try and clean up the town. Prentiss has them all scared. Now you show up and do what I should have done a long time ago."

HUGH reminded him, "It's not too late. Give me a hand and we'll clean up the town and you can keep it that way."

Teacher looked up at him and a grim smile turned the corners of his mouth. "I've been taking Prentiss' money. Now you want me to turn on him."

"Prentiss got paid in full," Meredith said. "He's been safe here for two years. He's been warned the party is over. From now on, it's a new deal. You don't owe him a thing."

Teacher came heavily to his feet. "I don't know, Hugh, but I want you to know that I appreciate getting the chance. You could have ridden in here and told me I was through and to keep out of the way while you did my job. I know that's what you were told to do. But you gave me a break and I'm grateful." He dropped his gaze. "I just don't know if I've got the guts. Things have been easy for too long. I just don't know."

Meredith said, "You better find out. Prentiss is coming in at dark. It will be too late then to make up your mind."

Teacher looked up in surprise. "Why, that's right. I better do that."

He wheeled abruptly about and walked quickly from the office. Hugh Meredith settled back in his chair, thinking of what the marshal had told him. The excuse was there, but there was always an excuse if a man wanted one. Still, he could not shut the man out without a chance. Things had never been black and white to him, even when his job insisted that they should be. A man made mistakes and sometimes they were hard to rectify. But if he was willing to try and correct them, he should have that chance. That was what he was doing for Ben Teacher—giving him one last chance to hold his head up again. For a man without pride was dead, and Ben Teacher's pride was gone.

Sheriff Meredith sat there in the office until four o'clock. Exactly at four, he drew his revolver, checked the loads, then settled it easily back in holster. He crossed the street to the Longhorn Saloon, aware that he was the target of every pair of eyes in town. He was alert to the smell of trouble, looking for the signs he had to know so well.

But Prairie City lay somnolent and quiet in the afternoon's downpouring sunlight. The town had an air of waiting, an expectant and perhaps hopeful air. The town waited for the return of Yancey Prentiss. Some of the people here were hoping Prentiss would lose and some that he would win, but all were pleased by the flash of excitement Hugh Meredith's orders had caused in their uneventful existence.

The Longhorn was closed. Meredith tried the door, then turned down the walk, moving unhurriedly, with a show of complete unconcern. The town respected strength. Skip Lainson came out of the alley beside the Longhorn and confronted the sheriff. The fat saloon owner was smiling, and his gaze was not entirely unfriendly.

"You bit off a big chunk, Sheriff," he commented. "But I like a man who does things with a certain style. I hope you can make it stick."

"I'll make it stick," Meredith promised.

"Watch Prentiss," Skip said. "He's tough enough, but he can be tricky, too. Don't give him too much of a chance. He won't come alone."

"I'll remember it, Lainson, and thanks."

Lainson smiled. "Don't thank me. I

figure you'll be lying dead in the street tonight and if you are, my saloon will be open an hour later."

"Fair enough," Hugh Meredith said, and went on down the street.

He checked every saloon. They were all closed. He had a feeling as he stopped at several of them that the owners were patiently waiting inside for the moment he would fall to Prentiss' gun. Then they would open up and serve the thirsty victors. But that was their privilege. All he had told anybody was to close, and they had closed. This was the first step in cleaning up the town. When they reopened, a new order would be in force and they would have to abide by it.

AS HE TURNED down the side street he saw that Marie's was locked and dark. Big Sally's curtains were drawn, but the front door was open. He crossed the street, came up onto the porch and entered the house. He stood for a moment inside the door, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, then walked down the short hallway into the parlor.

He brought up short. Ben Teacher sat in one of the heavy brocade chairs. He was smoking a cigar and a bottle of whisky and a glass were on the small table beside his chair. The bottle was a quarter empty. Big Sally came to her feet at Hugh Meredith's entrance, a tall, heavy woman of fifty whose face was deeply lined. She had the bluest of eyes and her hair was entirely white.

Teacher looked up and saw Meredith, but showed no embarrassment. "Come in Hugh," he invited. "Have a drink with me."

"Not now, Ben. He looked at the woman. "The place is still open."

She shook her head. "No, I just forgot to close the front door. We're closed, Sheriff."

"You're out of business in this town," the sheriff said. "I told you that this morning."

"I know, but I couldn't move today. We'll start tomorrow." It was plain what she meant. She didn't expect Meredith to be around then to enforce the order.

Teacher broke in, "Sally's an old friend of mine, Hugh. She won't give you any trouble."

She said, "I wish you luck, Sheriff. Yancey Prentiss is a dog and I hope you kill him. I won't even mind moving. I'm getting too old for this business anyhow. I'm going to quit."

Meredith said, "I'll be moving along . . . Ben. you want to come along?"

"Not yet," Teacher said. "I'll see you later." Meredith realized that the marshal still had not made up his mind. He had the feeling that Ben's mind would not be made up when the fight came. The ability to make a tough decision was gone from Ben Teacher, along with his pride.

As Meredith went back to the office, he wondered how a man could let himself so completely forget the obligations he'd assumed when he pinned on the star. Those obligations were the guiding principles of Hugh Meredith's own life. They drove him relentlessly and forced him to make decisions he would have given anything not to have to make. But belief in his duty was the basis of his strength and his only faith.

At six o'clock, he went to the cafè and ate a big meal. It settled on his stomach so heavily he wished he hadn't eaten it. He bought a cigar and got it burning evenly, then walked the streets, memorizing every alley and cul-de-sac, until he had a firm picture in his mind that he could conjure up when darkness fell. For the game tonight would be a cat and mouse thing, with him standing alone against Yancey Prentiss and however many men the outlaw brought along.

He had to have every advantage of position if he was to survive. When he returned to the office at seven, the tension began to get bad, pulling at all the muscles of his big shoulders and back, making him irritable, faintly depressed. He took another revolver from one of the drawers in the desk, loaded it carefully and stuck it in the waistband of his trousers.

When finally he left the office he went by the back way, coming out into the alley and moving along it until he reached another alley that ran beside the mercantile to the street. He entered this, which was some four feet wide, moved to the front of the building and stopped there with the entire street in sight. No one moved along its dark length. A few lamps made feeble attempts to push back the darkness, but succeeded only in creating small islands of shadow. In the hushed quiet of the town a baby's shrill crying carried, and was suddenly stopped.

STANDING there, alone, Hugh Meredith had time to think, and thinking was always bad. He thought of how many times he had stood alone like this, waiting for a man. He was forty years old and for twenty of those years he had been packing a star. It made him different than other men, made him aloof and cautious and always edgy. It also put a barrier between him and his friends.

If he survived this fight, he had no choice but to turn Ben Teacher out of his job. He couldn't do it himself, but he could see that it was done. He was under those orders. And Ben had been his friend for many years. They had ridden together and fought together. In their more youthful days when he had called on Ben for help it had never been refused. Now he had put his old friend in a tough spot and if Ben failed to come through, he, Sheriff Meredith, had to be the one who saw that the marshal got the ax.

His thoughts growing more and more bitter, he kept up his solitary vigil, never for a moment thinking of leaving.

Time dragged slowly on to eight o'clock, and by then he was sure that he could expect no help from Ben Teacher. It filled him with a deeper regret than any he had ever known. For if there was one single belief Hugh Meredith had, it was that the man with the star was of good stuff. It hurt him, and it shook his confidence to know that Teacher didn't have the nerve to come out and stand beside him.

At nine o'clock, Meredith heard horses coming in from the south—four of them. He didn't like the odds. But he could not change them. The horsemen rode at a gallop to the end of the street, but drew rein and sat their mounts for awhile, apparently scanning the street. When they came on it was at a walk, and they were spread out, fan-shaped. Meredith could see that Yancey Prentiss was riding point, a huge shape in the shadowy street.

The outlaws came on until they were abreast the Longhorn. Suddenly a noise from the side street brought them to a quick halt. Shooting a swift look in that direction, Hugh Meredith saw a man stride from the side street and walk directly to the center of Main. He stopped there straight and proudly faced the mounted outlaws. Marshal Ben Teacher!

He had shed his coat, and his shirt-sleeved arms hung straight down at his sides. Hugh Meredith moved down the street toward him at a fast walk. He had a hundred yards to cover before he would be in decent gun range, but he didn't dare run. If the outlaws saw him, they would open the ball before he was set. He cursed Teacher silently for not telling him about this.

Yancey Prentiss' voice broke the night's stillness. "You're a little off your beat, Marshal. Big Sally's is back up the street."

"You're through here, Yancey," Ben Teacher said in the softest of voices. "I was wrong in ever letting you come to town. Now you'll leave and stay out."

"What about all that money I've paid you, Marshal? You forgetting that?" Prentiss' voice was amused, almost teasing, but his eyes flicked this way and that, searching for Hugh Meredith. Only that doubt of the sheriff's whereabouts kept him from action. But the sheriff was in the deep shadow of the buildings and could not be seen.

"That was wrong, too," Teacher said. "You got your money's worth. Now the party's over. Get out of town and stay out!" In Teacher's voice was the old, tough ring, and Meredith felt a surge of pride as he heard the old lawman. Teacher

stood there, knowing he had no chance, but defiantly flinging out orders. At that moment, there was about him a tremendous dignity. It held Yancey Prentiss quiet long enough for Hugh Meredith to decide he was in good range and move further into the street.

MEREDITH said, "You boys better do like the marshal says."

Yancey Prentiss hesitated for only a moment more, then shrugged. He said, "Well, I never liked drawing against a stacked deck."

He made a motion as if to wheel the horse, and came out of the saddle in the same smooth movement. It put him on the far side of his horse, away from the sheriff, but in plain sight of Ben Teacher. Hugh saw Teacher's gun arm rising, then Yancey Prentiss' gun boomed. Teacher took one awkward step and fell headlong to the street. He did not move again.

Hugh Prentiss' gun dropped the rider beside Prentiss with his first shot. The other two, confused by the swiftness of events, wheeled their mounts and raced out of town. Silence fell again, briefly. Meredith was running forward, his gun held chest high, waiting for a shot at Prentiss. Near panic touched him when he could see nothing of the outlaw, then he knew what he had to do. He stopped and took brief aim and fired. Yancey Prentiss' horse went down without a sound, a bullet through its head. Prentiss had to jump back to keep from being pinned under the mount.

They faced each other then across fifty feet of dark street. Meredith brought his gun down squarely on that big shape, taking his time. Prentiss fired quickly, his bullet making a tearing sound as it struck the thin wall of the building behind the sheriff. The outlaw chief started forward, firing as he walked, and on the third shot, Hugh Meredith fired. He saw Prentiss falter, then come on. But the outlaw's gun arm sagged and his next shot kicked up a shower of dust ten feet in front of Meredith. Prentiss halted then, trying to lift his gun, which seemed to have become unbearably heavy. The sheriff sighted again and fired deliberately. His bullet slammed into Yancey Prentiss and turned him over. He coughed once and his gun spilled from his hand. Then he fell loosely.

Hugh Meredith hurried forward to where Ben Teacher lay. He turned the marshal over, but saw at a glance that Ben was dead. He felt a deep regret. He had brought this about. People were running out of the buildings now, but before any of them reached the scene, Big Sally was there. She dropped on her knees beside Ben Teacher, raised his head and held it in her lap. She was crying, the tears losing themselves in the many lines of her face.

"It was all your fault," she told Hugh Meredith bitterly. "If you had stayed away, Ben would still be alive."

The sheriff climbed stiffly to his feet, replacing his hat which he had taken off in deference to the dead man.

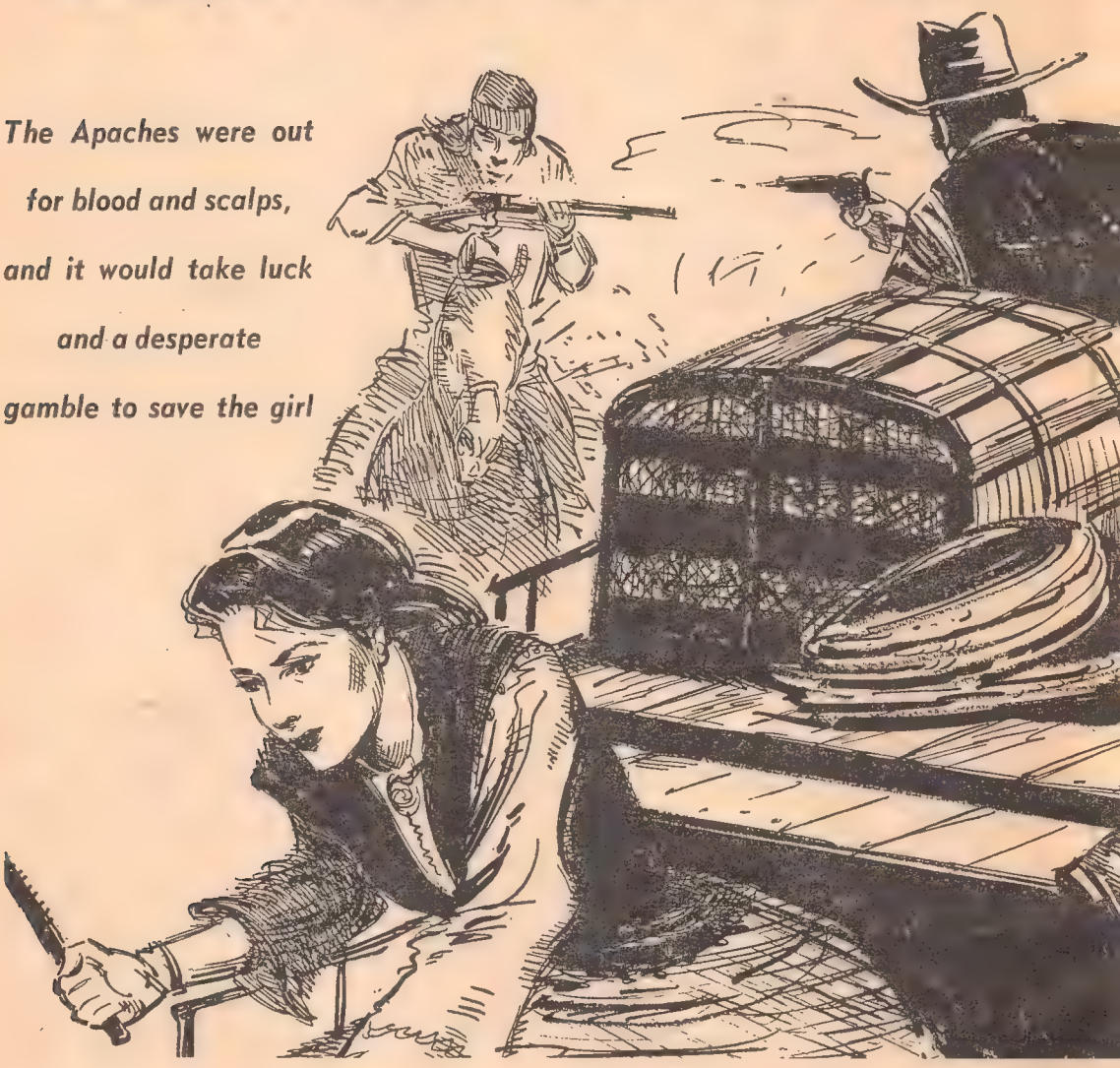
He said, "Ma'am, it was the way he would have wanted it. He got his pride back. That was worth more to him than anything else."

He waited for her to answer, knowing that if she wanted to rake him over, he would take it. But she said nothing more.

When he saw her brief nod, he turned and walked swiftly back to the office of the late marshal, already wondering where he would find as good a man to replace him.

Embers of War

The Apaches were out for blood and scalps, and it would take luck and a desperate gamble to save the girl



CHAPTER I

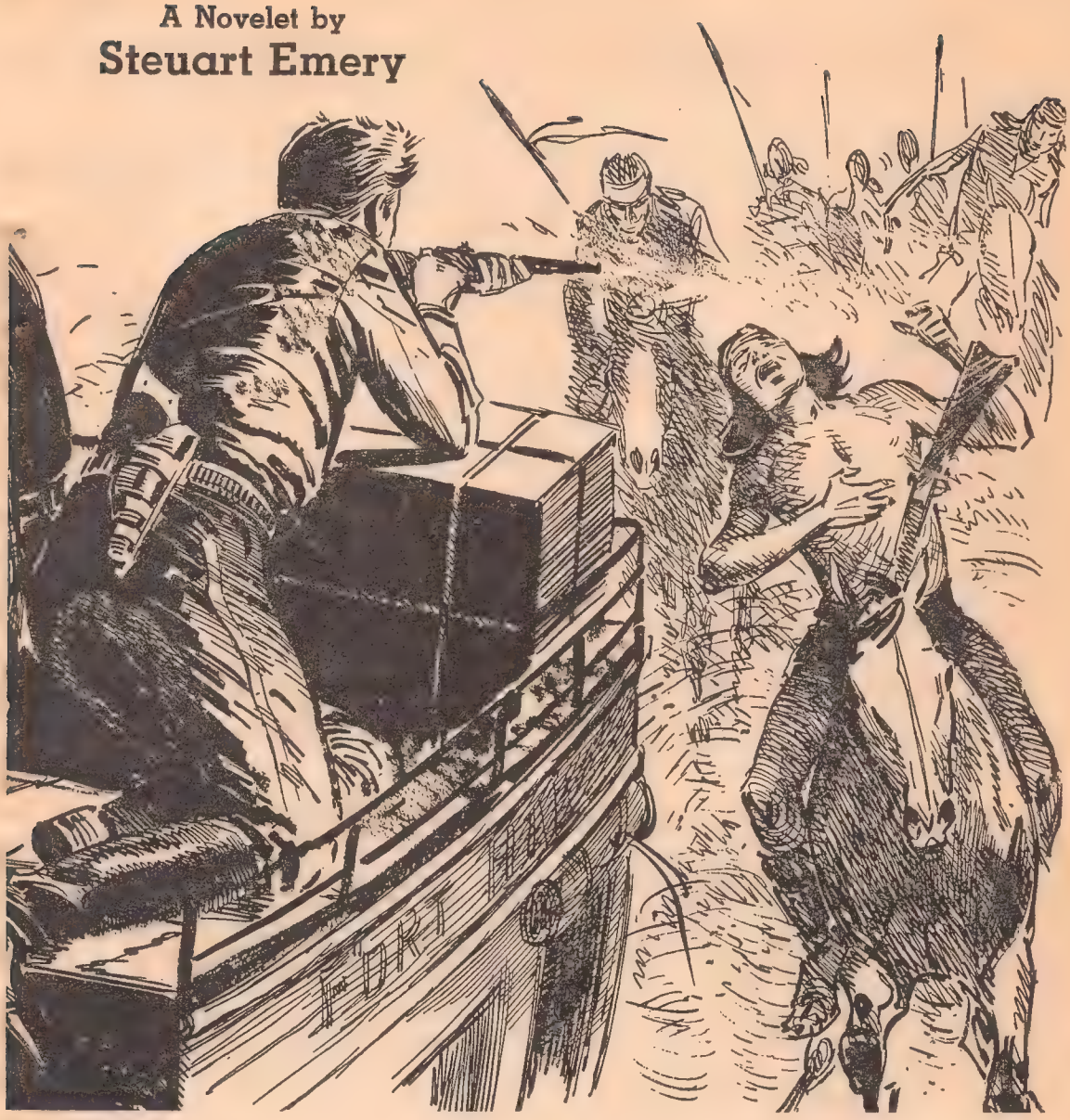
Toward a New Life

THE bitter dust of the desert was in his throat and lungs, rasping them raw, but it was no worse than the bitter taste of the ruined years that he had known. Ahead of him the four stage horses labored in their sweat-stained collars, but the tug of their power on his hands was not as strong as the tug of memories that tore at him night and day. He was a dead ember out of the holocaust of war that had cut its belt of flame and destruction down through Tennessee and Georgia and eastward to the sea and up into the Carolinas, while Virginia went up in smoke.

The war had seared deep into his lean,

A Novelet by

Steuart Emery



under-thirty face with its aristocratic aquiline nose and its steel-clamped mouth that looked as though it had forgotten how to smile. He was weathered to the core, a dangerous hardness frozen into the remnants of patrician good looks that the zigzag white scar along the jaw had altered forever. Johnstone Gale, late gentleman of Virginia and captain in the Confederate cavalry, was as tough an hombre as a lost cause and hopeless hard times had thrown out into the burgeoning West to make a new life for himself on the ashes of the old one.

The stage lurched on its thoroughbraces and his muscular, rangy body lurched in rhythm with it. He was keeping the lead and wheel horses in perfect pace, reins expertly gripped in his hands the way he had held them tooling his own tallyho

coach in a green land in gracious days he would never know again. The gentleman's sporting hobbies had become the working man's living. Stage driver, range wrangler, card dealer, poker player—he had been all of them for seven long years on the frontier, and then the current of his drifting had washed him and his companion up at the railhead at Bridgerville.

Last night, with a single double eagle nested in his money-belt, he had heard the half-drunk driver of the stage to Fort Harrison and the shotgun guard quit on the owner and the job had gone in minutes to the pair of Southern wanderers.

NOW the adobe and false fronts of Bridgerville were miles behind him on his first run with a coachful of passengers he hadn't even seen yet. He and his companion had stopped in front of the hotel for the passengers, and when they had come out of the bar after a quick one for the road the stage had been filled. He knew by the trunks on the roof that a woman and a child were among them, no doubt some lardy Yankee Army wife on her way to the post with her running-nosed Yankee brat.

He cursed and cracked the long leather over the backs of the lead span and they lumbered into faster pace. This was going to be a hell of a ride. Dust devils, spawned by a fast wind, were swirling everywhere, and what looked like a solid wall of dust was building up on the horizon. They'd be lucky if they got to Fort Harrison before the storm hit. And the fort would be just one more desolate way station in his life, a stockade of sun-peeled logs sprawled in the blistering heat, enclosing a baked ground with the colors hanging limp at the flagstaff.

How he hated the red, white and blue flag of the winning side! And how he hated, above all, a certain lying, traitorous, incredibly handsome Yankee captain who, he had read in a months-old newspaper back in San Antone, had made himself a terrific reputation fighting Indians in the Dakotas and was being called to Washington for official commendation. Always there had lurked in the background of his mind the evil dream of meeting the Yankee again and smashing that handsome face into bloody pulp. He'd beat the living guts out of him, but Cabe Colee, Gale's companion from the Virginia mountains, would kill him on sight. Beside him now on the high driving seat Colee grunted and Gale turned to him.

Gaunt, grizzle-bearded and fifty-odd, Cabe Colee, the one-time sergeant in Gale's troop, hunched with his rifle across his knees. A savage brooding was chiseled in his hatchetlike face; he was a man who had been born into blood feuds and steeled to killing by the war against the Yankees he hated. When Gale had returned to his plantation home, levelled to ashes by Sheridan's raiders, Colee from the frowning hills, now equally homeless, had thrown in his lot with him. A deadly, tactiturn man with only one crack in his armor, children and animals, he was a friend who could be relied on to the finish, and an enemy who never relented. He had a mountain man's uncanny instinct for danger.

"What is it, Cabe?" asked Gale.

Colee, who had lifted a battered pair of field-glasses, passed them over.

"Smoke on the Border, Johnny. Where thar's smoke thar's fire. Apache fire."

Through the long-range glasses Gale made out the thin feather of black that rose lazily into the brilliant blue arch. It broke into balls that soared upward, stopped, and broke upward again. He had had plenty of experience Indian fighting on the frontier and out here in Arizona he expected to have more, with Red Cougar prowling below the Border with an army of long-maned braves at his back.

"No white man ever knows what Injun smoke signals mean except that they mean trouble," he murmured.

"Heap big trouble," drawled Colee. I feel it in my bones."

"It's just the shin bone you got the bullet in predicting bad weather."

"Ain't the shin bone. It's the skull bone chillin' up under my scalp I have

managed to keep so far. It gives me the hunch Red Cougar is out and ra'rin'."

Gale's eyes traversed the limitless waste before him through which the rough track of road ran to the fort. Dotted by cactus and mesquite and marred by jutting malpais it was a sun-tortured, scarified land that burned the energy out of man and beast and killed with its relentless heat if given a chance.

IN IT, thriving on hardships that destroyed the white man, roamed the Apaches, always invisible until they struck.

"I'll speed it up, Cabe. If you want to get that chill out of your skull take your hat off for fifteen minutes and steam will come up out of your scalp."

"Trouble I see, I told you," Colee said grimly. "Seventh son of a seventh son, born in a Blue Ridge Mountains cave, maybe I am. And right now . . . Look out! Dust devil comin' in!"

Spiraling on its base, the plume of dust that had been racing over the desert ahead of them off to the right had swerved without warning in a vagrant gust and was tearing straight for the stage.

"Duck!" yelled Gale, and plunged his head down.

In a blinding onset the dust devil swamped horses and stage, drove thousands of particles of stinging dust onto Gale's face and hands and spun away. Gasping, he lifted his head and looked at the snorting teams, plastered white with the alkali like that which covered his clothes and Colee's. The stage roof was thick with its arid coating, and yells of discomfort rose from inside the stage.

"Driver!"

It was the voice of the woman passenger whose trunk rode the roof behind him. It sounded half-choked and he knew what was coming—blame.

"Yes, ma'am," he called.

"Can you pull up the stage and let my child and myself ride up top in the air? We're half-strangled down here by the dust. The child can't breathe."

"She's got lots thar," grunted Colee.

Gale's hands went to the brake to ratchet it on and the stage stopped. In the traces the teams drew shuddering breaths of relief that swelled and collapsed their flanks. Then the woman passenger was at the wheel, holding up the little girl. Colee reached out and lifted her high and set her on the stage roof.

"Thar you are, little missy. We-all will set back here, cozylike."

The little girl of nine or ten smiled at him and she was lovely when she smiled. Blue eyes, soft, fair hair, an exquisite complexion—it was a long time since the desert had seen anything like this. Colee guided her to the rear seat and Gale reached down to give a hand to the young woman coming aboard the coach's top. She swung up with his grip and settled beside him, dropping her dust veil.

Physical shock ran through him and a tide of old memories swamped his brain. This girl somewhere in her early twenties was the younger sister grown up, fulfilling every promise of early loveliness and more. He hadn't seen a woman like this in seven years and he had hardened himself to the knowledge that he was done with his own kind. Now she was tearing apart his shell of cynicism and he hated her for it.

"Pretty bad that dust, wasn't it?" she asked in a friendly tone.

"Bad enough," he answered shortly, and slapped leather to rumps.

With a rough heave the stage began to roll. Gale drove with clamped lips, buried in self-imposed silence.

"I'm Diane Duane, small town Maryland."

"Johnstone Gale, Virginia." He gave his name gruffly and went mute.

"Horse country Virginia?" she asked. "You handle the ribbons like a born horseman. University of Virginia?"

"Virginia Military Institute," he said, caught off-guard.

"I could see university right away, and hear Virginia in your speech. Maryland's Southern, too, but it was Union in the war. I guess to you I'm a damn Yankee. You were in the war, of course?"

"Never mind." In spite of himself Gale's fingers strayed to the betraying scar. "I can't carry on any conversation. I'm a stage driver with a stage to drive."

She was torturing him, driving at him, scraping his nerves apart with her easy, friendly talk. Dust-coating, weather-hammered skin, evil scar and rough clothes—she had gone under them and was talking to him as a lady to a gentleman, and he had left that life behind him forever. The damn Yankees had finished that and he loathed them all.

A HURT look came into the girl's blue eyes and she turned her head.

"You all right back there, Sally?"

"She is quite all right, ma'am," said Colee. "She has asked me where I hail from and I have told her from the top of a mountain in Virginny so high we got angels settin' on the rooftree at night with their haids tucked under their wings."

A happy lilt of childish laughter followed and the little girl's pleading voice. "Tell me more. Have you got wild animals?"

"We got wildcats so wild they tie knots in their own tails. We got sidehill gophers with their left laigs three inches shorter'n their right laigs from travelin' on the sides of the mountains."

"Oh!"

"Sally's all right," said Diane. She's made a new friend. He's very nice, your guard."

Nice? Cabe Colee, with a venomonous hatered of all Yankees, a chilled steel mountain feudist nice? Gale choked and drove on, his eyes riveted between the off lead horse's ears. First this glowing girl saw a gentleman in him, and then a nice man in Cabe Colee. She was a hopeless optimist but the desert would cure her of that.

"I think I'm going to like the West," she said while he stared stiffly ahead. "The first introduction to it is usually bad—isn't it? A rough trip and a bit of time to get used to heat and dust. We came out to see if we want to settle here. I'm staying with Mrs. Captain Jenkins at the fort. I've never met her, but we've exchanged letters and she seems to be friendly. Do you know any of the officers at the fort?"

"Not a living soul," said Gale. Now he had a chatterbox on his hands. "And I don't want to," he added harshly.

"Can't you bury that old saber?" Diane's voice was soft. "We're all one country now. The West is a totally new country in itself, isn't it?"

Gale locked his lips more tightly and made no answer. This was the kind of sentimental talk he could expect from a sheltered Union girl from a part of Maryland that had never known the wrath of invasion. She hadn't been plunged from luxury into want by the war and she would never know want. Protected and moneyed, she would go through life without ever knowing what it was all about.

"I'm coming out to visit at the invitation of the officer commanding Fort Harrison," the girl was going on. "When my father died and there was no one in the family to run the bank he owned it was sold, and Sally and I went to stay with an uncle and aunt in Washington. I met the major at all the dances and receptions. He was quite the lion of the hour, an Indian fighting hero. The perfect soldier type—you know, beautiful build, handsome, absolutely charming manners. When he was ordered to Fort Harrison to command the post and end the Apache threat he begged me to come out and see the real West before it was tamed so I accepted and, of course, brought Sally along."

Gale looked again at the mountain masses jumbled to the south where the smoke had flung its message into the skies. He wanted to keep his mind off the girl's prattle. It was all too clear—the newly-minted heiress ardently wooed by the dashing young major whose saber was his fortune.

"You'll like him when you meet him," she assured. He was a hero in the War Between the States, too. They called him 'The Man Who Saved Washington.' You remember, of course, that Jubal Early almost captured Washington in sixty-four."

"Arrh!" It was a grunt of pain, shaken out of Gale.

Into his mind flashed back the scene of so long ago. The dome of the Capitol building gleaming over the roofs and trees of the enemy's citadel in the June sun, the footsore, exhausted raiding force of General Old Jube penetrating to the outskirts of the city, worn down and thinned out by the Union troops flung out to meet them at the Monocacy, the long lines of soldiers and armed civilians filing into the Washington forts . . . He recalled the actual details only too well.

OLD JUBE had missed taking Washington by a hair. The twenty-four hour delay of battle and fatigue had defeated him. It had given Washington time to reinforce, and the last great sally of the Confederacy out of Virginia had failed in sight of success. Gale himself had been just another bone-tired soldier in gray, the leader of a cavalry picket, who had been turned back with the rest onto the long journey into eventual defeat.

"I heard about it," he said gruffly.

"Early was coming through Maryland unopposed with twenty-five thousand men, and there was no warning of his coming. He had the capital at his mercy, as you know. My—my friend was out leading a Union cavalry patrol far westward and ran into a troop of Early's cavalry and was captured. He shot the soldier who was guarding him and managed to get a horse and ride for it, bringing the alarm in time to send out General Lew Wallace's force to delay General Early while reinforcements were brought up for the city. He saved Washington."

A terrible flood of fury pounded in Gale's pulses and the veins on his ravaged forehead stood out like whipcord. He struck viciously at the nearest horse and the stage swayed forward.

"Yes," he said, "I reckon he saved Washington. And cost the Confederacy one hell of a lot of lives."

"He was promoted to major and he's still a major, very young. Major Chase Harding."

Major Chase Harding. The name exploded like a bombshell in Johnstone Gale's brain. It had been Captain Harding of the Union cavalry when he had faced him in the lamplit Maryland farmhouse and accepted his parole, sealing their bargain with a handshake. Everything on the outside of Chase Harding was splendid; everything on the inside of him was rotten. Somehow Gale had felt all along that the wheel of chance would come full circle and that they would confront each other again. Here was a new country where old enemies met.

"Major Chase Harding you said, ma'am?" Cabe Colee was leaning forward on the guard's seat, his eyes glittering like points of steel between their slitted lids. "He is the commandin' officer at the fort?"

"Yes. You know of him?"

Colee's fist gripped the stock of his rifle so hard the knuckles showed white. "Nary a know. But I am looking forward greatly, ma'am, to meetin' up with him."

The words were softly spoken but Major Chase Harding's death sentence was in them. He wouldn't live twenty-four hours after Cabe Colee, the wronged blood feudist, reached the fort.

"That's enough, Cabe." Gale framed the words, but they never came out, swamped by another mouthful of dust.

Everywhere now the dust devils danced by the scores, zigzagging and twisting all over the arid waste. He had never seen them this thick before. And down to the south, coming around the corner of a sheltering butte, was a particularly queer kind of dust devil, long and trailing and making fast progress transversely to the blowing wind. It would cut across the path of the stage in another mile the way it was headed. Now it became clearer and it had dots in it, crouched on top of galloping blurs.

"Cabe! Your glasses! Throw them on that dust devil coming up from the butte to the south."

"Throwin' the glases," said Colee calmly and raised them. "Hit them horses' rumps, Johnny! Injuns!"

CHAPTER II

Red Raiders in a Sand Storm

GALE'S stomach tightened and he slammed leather. Ahead the desert rose in the long swell of a sand hill with the road cutting through its crest. With its four strong, well-fed horses the stage could make a run for it on the flat but when the spans had to labor uphill the Apaches on their fleet ponies would overhaul it fast.

"They're trying to cut us off at the grade, Cabe!" he called. "Better try to trim them off before we get there."

"Sure will, Johnny," came Colee's growl. "Little missy"—his harsh voice became cajoling—"yuh do something for me. Get yourself lying flat on the roof back of that big trunk and hold onto its strap for dear life. When you hear poppin' do not be afeard. Uncle Cabe will take care of you."

"Sally," Diane said sharply, "do what Uncle Cabe says."

An angry shout sounded from below and Gale looked down on a moon-faced passenger thrusting his body out of the stage window.

"Whassa matter, driver?" yelled the fat man. "You trying to upset this stage?"

"Apaches, you damned fool!" snapped Gale. "You got any arms down there?"

"Not an iron," puffed the moon-faced man, paling.

"Then get down on the floor and stay there when the shooting starts."

He needed every break of the luck and he wasn't getting any. He threw the long lash with remorseless vigor, sending his teams into a plunging stride. Behind him he heard Cabe cock his rifle hammer. Half a mile ahead the sand hill loomed and the nearest Apaches were three hundred yards away, kicking their moccasins into their ponies' ribs in a flying gallop. There were close to twenty Indians and five of them, well out in front of the rest, were going to cut the stage off.

"Time to open up, Cabe."

"Opening up, Johnny!"

Colee's rifle cracked in a beautiful shot and the leading Apache's pony plunged forward onto its nose, throwing its rider. An insane howling broke from the racing braves and they came on faster. Colee's lone rifle, deadly as it might be, wasn't going to be enough. Gale steadied himself on the rocking seat.

"Anything I can do?" Diane asked quietly. Only a tiny quiver at her nostrils betrayed emotion.

"Plenty, since you're Maryland horse country. You can drive?"

"I've always driven."

"Then you drive this stage while I work the extra rifle. Keep as low down as you can. They're beginning to fire."

Shots cracked from the Apaches and slugs whipped past the stage and its running horses as Gale passed the reins to the girl and reached for the Winchester. It was going to be touch and go, with the Apaches tearing at an angle to block the stage, hardly sixty yards away. Colee's rifle exploded and its bullet swept a half-naked body off horseflesh. Gale leveled his gun on another copper figure and squeezed trigger. He saw moccasined feet go up into his sight and swerved his barrel to take another. Now the Indians were on top of the stage, driving the last few yards, and it was mad seconds of pumping lead in a din of screeching.

The spearhead of the Indian attack fell away and lay where it fell. Gale lowered his rifle, panting, and jammed a reload of shells into its magazine. Beside him, bent forward, Diane handled the reins and sent the whip lashing out over the galloping teams. She apparently hadn't even looked aside as Gale and Colee blew the Apache onset to pieces. She had concentrated on her job of getting the stage into top speed.

"You rolled us through, Miss Diane," said Gale. "It's a stern chase now."

It would be, with the main force of oncoming Apaches falling in on the road behind the stage in a disorderly straggle, each brave jamming his pony to the ut-

most. But the test lay directly ahead. The stage lurched as its wheels ran over a dead branch, straightened out, and the horses strained to take the beginning of the rise at full pace. The walls of the sand hill closed in on either side of the road and reeled past. The coach was on the incline and the Apache yells of anticipation told Gale that they knew it. On they hurtled, and on lumbered the stage with foam blowing back from the outspread nostrils of the horses.

"Hold your fire, Cabe!" called Gale in sudden excitement. "They're bunching!"

THE cut had narrowed the Apache front to a space where not more than five Apaches could ride abreast. From wall to wall ponies and red riders filled the road in a pounding mass. Full into the rise, the stage horses were slowing their pace as the weight of the coach began to pull them down, and the Indians were gaining fast. Seventy yards behind, sixty, fifty—Gale could see the gaping holes of the savage mouths that spewed screeches. The whites of their eyes would show next and—

"Give them everything you've got! Fire!"

No shot could miss against a target that ran practically from wall to wall. Gale levered like a madman and heard Cabe's Winchester go into a rolling burst. Ponies and men were going down in a maelstrom of destruction, riders racing from behind were being thrown by the bodies of horses and braves that littered the track. There was no way for the Apache charge to dodge the sleet of fire that swept the narrow cut. They had to charge squarely into it and take it.

Gale's fingers crammed shells and he raised a reloaded rifle. The stage horses were laboring hard up the last of the crest. The vehicle would go rocking free of weight down the far side of the incline if it could make the grade. But the Apaches were streaming forward and they weren't thirty yards behind now. One more rush and they would be abreast of the stage and it would all be over.

For an instant the cut lay bare, and beneath him Gale felt the stage lurch into higher speed. Then it began to roll, clear of all drag, and behind him lay the rest of the rise. They had won to a crossing of the summit and were tearing downhill with the stage carried by its own momentum.

"Keep lashing," he cast at the girl. "We've hit them hard. They won't try another rush in this cut. But they'll spread out on the flat and that's when they'll get us."

"When you can," said the girl quietly, "turn around and look at what's ahead of us."

"Can't now," bit out Gale. Over the rise on the track to the rear the Apaches poured again, for he had guessed their play right. Now they galloped single file, giving the smallest possible target. There was to be no relief from the chase. The Apaches meant to press it to a bloody finish, and there were still plenty of them left.

"Tell me what you see," Gale called to Diane.

Colee's gunfire drowned her answer, and Gale brought his own Winchester up. In the lead of the pursuit, screaming orders, stormed a tall, cruel-looking brave with a yellow headband and a big silver breastpiece. Here was the leader and Gale took him in his sight and let go. A lock of hair sheared from the Apache's mane and he jerked aside and was swallowed by the rush of ponies behind him. Gale veered to the next Apache and watched the red-brown body plunge in its death fall. But the next brave he picked was closer, for on their swift ponies the Indians were gaing fast on the stage. He felt the whole vehicle jerk and sway as the sand walls fell aside and he realized that they were out on the flatland again with the weight of the coach and passengers loading down the horses, already tired by the furious pace and the uphill grade they had traversed.

"Hit those horses harder!" he panted to Diane. "Those redskins are gaining!"

"They're doing their best," said the

girl. "For heaven's sake, look in front of us!"

Gale fired again. The next squeeze his hammer clicked on emptiness and his hand went to his ammunition belt, seeking shells. He turned and stared along the road in front.

"It's coming fast," said Diane. "And we're traveling fast right into it."

In a solid wall that stretched across a full half-mile of flatland the dust cloud rolled for the stage. It was a desert sandstorm in full blast, billowing, roiling, made up of countless dust devils and the surface alkali that a sudden wind was scraping into the air and carrying along in an almost solid mass. All vision, all sense would be blotted out when it hit the stage. And all pursuit, it came to Gale in his desperation, would be blinded.

"Faster, faster!" he groaned. "Take us straight into it!"

His last shell clicked into the magazine and he whipped around to find the leading Apache horsemen not forty yards behind and overhauling their prey in swift leaps.

"Jammed!" yelled Colee, and a savage curse broke from him as he worked at his rifle lever.

COLD fear chilled Gale's spine as the Apaches whooped in triumph. Two braves were hurtling so fast there wouldn't even be time for him to get off more than one shot. They were well separated, one on each side of the stage and behind them the others also had spread out, offering no crowded target. The lathered pony swept up to the stage, drew abreast of it and Gale looked down into the muzzle of a rifle. He heard the Apache's yell of hate, saw his gleaming eyes filled with blood lust, as the brave's finger crooked on the trigger. He was firing pointblank at Gale's head.

And then in the center of the Apache's own forehead a round hole appeared and he went stiff in his saddle. It wasn't until the Indian lurched into the air that Gale realized he had fired a split instant ahead of the Apache and that the Indian's lead had ripped through his own hat.

A screech from the left side of the stage yanked him around. By the off wheel horse the Apache rode, raising his lance to plunge it in behind the horse's shoulder to the heart and bring it down in its traces. Out from the driver's seat something flicked, long and leathering, and the lash of the stage whip driven by Diane sliced savagely across the brave's eyes. Howling in agony and stricken blind he straightened in his seat. Gale's bullet took him.

"Good work!" gasped Gale. "Good . . . Arrgh! Give me reins!"

He fumbled for the lines and got them as all breath and sight was driven from him. The stage and the racing dust storm had come together and he was conscious of a terrific lurch and a strangled yell of shock from Colee as the coach hit a stone and almost overturned before it plunged into a curtain of black that tore and ripped and stung.

There was no more vision, no more hearing in his clogged ears, no more breathing except in short, hard-fought gasps, with the dust smothering his lungs. It struck in a flash against the scarf that he had pulled over his face, he felt that he was drowning in dirt. He dropped his head almost to his knees and hauled on the reins to bring down the teams he couldn't even see but could feel still tugging at the stage. The pace dropped to a walk and he swung the teams. Now he could feel the fury of the storm smashing broadside on and he kept the horses guided in the half-circle that would bring them out with their tails to the blast and give them a chance to breathe.

Physical agony racked him and he knew that it racked the girl beside him, invisible even two feet away on the same seat with him. Once he reached out a hand and touched her to be sure she was still there. On the roof back of them Colee and the little girl Sally would be living through the same hell. As the stage swung in its arc and the storm struck on his back, grinding its atoms through his shirt and into his flesh, he got it to a dead halt. Now they would sit and try to live

it out with the wind at their backs.

Time had ceased to exist in black, torturing chaos. Then suddenly the pressure on Gale's back eased, the stinging ferocity died away and, opening his eyes, he could see again despite the pain and the blur in them. Reaching down beside the driver's seat he got hold of the canteen that hung by the brake and unscrewed its top.

"Handkerchief," he croaked, passing it. "Wash eyes. Drink."

He stared at the mass of dust cloud that rolled away from him. No Apaches came riding out of its screen.

"We made it," he said huskily, incredulously. "Fort's only another six miles or so now."

"Yes," gasped Diane, "we made it!" She passed the canteen and her soaked handkerchief to Gale and in turn he laved his burning eyes and sore face. "We're safe . . . Sally!"

A cry of agony broke from her and for the first time with his vision clear Gale looked along the stage roof. It was piled with sand, drifted inches deep behind the trunks. In the rear seat Gabe Colee, bent over, was fighting desperately to regain his breath. Nowhere on the roof was there a sign of the little girl who had been clinging to a trunk.

"Sally!" he panted. "Cabe! She's gone!"

Colee got his head up and fought for speech. In his blood-shot, dust-filled eyes was anguish.

"That bump, Johnny, just before we hit the dust cloud. It got her. It throwed her off'n the roof onto the ground with them red devils comin' right on top of her. A big Injun with a yeller headband stopped his pony and grabbed her. They're not going to foller us no more, Johnny. They got the little girl and they run for it away from the storm."

DIANE'S face twisted. "Oh!" She strangled and was silent.

"We can only wait," said Gale. He put his head over the side of the coach. "How are you down there, passengers?"

"Just about lived through it," came the husky answer.

"We're limping on to the fort. Everybody will have to hang and rattle until we get there. Cabe, swing down and get that horse water bag off the back. See what you can do to freshen up the horses. I'll sweep the desert for Sally."

He wiped off the field-glasses and put them to his eyes. The dust storm had rolled on. Now it was a full mile away and was breaking up. Far to the south beyond the storm's rim the desert showed clear and he caught the blur of motion.

"I think that's the Apaches way out there, headed for the Border with your sister," he said to Diane. "The one thing we can be sure of is that now we've got a war on our hands. From here on everything is up to the United States Cavalry."

"I see that. It's up to the cavalry and Major Harding."

"Yes," Gale said bitterly. "Major Chase Harding, the man who saved Washington. We'll see now if he can save your sister."

CHAPTER III

Old Enemy—New Guise

SHOULDERING onto the splintered porch of Headquarters Gale pushed on into the bare-walled outer office where a graying sergeant-major looked up from his paper work and let his jaw drop at the pair of apparitions before him.

"What kind of pilgrims are you?" he demanded. "The major don't allow tramps in here."

Gale knew that he and Colee looked like desert scarecrows filmed with alkali as they were, and with bloodshot eyes sunk in tortured faces. The stage had creaked through the fort gate and Mrs. Captain Jenkins, a pleasant, middle-aged woman, had gasped and swept Diane into her cottage instantly and sent for the

surgeon-major. While the passengers plunged for the sutler's store to wash away their experiences in whisky Gale had driven the stage to the stables, then he and Colee had made it to Headquarters.

"Tell the major the stage is here with Miss Diane Duane," he rasped. "Tell him we came through a dust storm and an Apache attack."

"Huh?"

The noncom levered up his bulk and headed for the closed door leading into the inner office. Behind the door was the man Johnstone Gale hated and Cabe Colee wanted to kill. Major Chase Harding. Colee stood with boots braced wide apart, left hand hooked in his belt next to the long, keen knife, right hand close to his sixgun. He looked ready to use either weapon at an instant's warning.

"Thar he is, Johnny!" Colee's breath expelled in a tiny hiss. "Same blasted bluebelly!"

Through the open door Gale saw Major Chase Harding as the passage of the years had made him. They had been as kind to him as they had been bitter and unsuccessful to Gale. Harding had grown a little heavier, a little more handsome with his smooth face and firm chin and the air of decisive authority stamped on him by success and self-confidence. His voice carried crisply.

"Send them in, Sergeant-major."

Gale walked in and came to a stop in front of the desk at which Harding sat. He caught Colee's heavy breathing at his side.

"Well?" snapped Harding. "And who are you?"

"Johnstone and Cabe. Stage driver and shotgun guard from Bridgerville."

Gale stared squarely at Harding and Harding stared squarely back at him with no flicker of recognition in his eyes. Beneath his coating of dust and in a driver's rough clothes Gale knew he would be unrecognizable as the young Confederate Cavalry officer of that night long ago, and he wanted it that way.

"Go on, Johnstone. Make it brief."

"I will."

Gale talked while Harding's heavy black brows came together in concentration. His big white teeth gnawed on his lower lip and his mouth became a thin, hard line.

"From your description," he said, "that was Draga, Red Cougar's brother and fighting sub-chief who scooped up the little girl. When Draga leads a raid across the Border it means Red Cougar is getting ready to move out in force for a war. And this post is definitely undermanned."

"What are you going to do?" demanded Gale.

Harding shrugged. "Wait," he said. "And let the first move come from Red Cougar."

"You aren't going to blow Boots and Saddles and ride right for Red Cougar?" Gale asked hotly.

"And just where are Red Cougar and his Apaches? My scouts haven't been able to find him. He may be holed up in a hideaway down below the Border in that jumble of mountains, or he may have crossed the line already. Apaches may be crazy to get hold of white women but they don't care anything about keeping small white girls who are of no value as slaves. Red Cougar will play the girl for an ace in the hole, I figure. He'll send his emissary into the fort under a flag of truce within forty-eight hours and make his demand for ransom. And it'll be a big one."

"Seems like you don't care much for small white girls yourself," croaked Colee. "Settin' on your bottom in a chair instead of bumpin' it in a saddle."

COLEE'S right hand crept across his belt and closed on the hilt of his knife while a ghastly fury blazed through the dust on his face. Harding stared at him. His own hand gripped the butt of the revolver at his waist and it lifted a little in its holster. Trained in the hard school of frontier life he had reacted instinctively to the threat.

"Steady, Cabe," warned Gale with urgency in his voice, and he put his hand

on the mountain man's arm.

Colee's face twitched and slowly his hand fell away from the knife. Harding's Army Colt dropped back into scabbard. It had been touch-and-go there for a breath. No one had a better reason for killing Major Chase Harding than Cabe Colee nor a better right.

"What's the matter with you?" Harding flung at Colee.

"I reckon I'm still a mite nervoused up from that Apache business." Colee bared his teeth. "When I am nervoused up I like to take my knife out and whittle."

"Do I know you? Have I ever seen you before?"

An intelligent man's memory was a peculiar thing, it came to Gale. It could retain, buried for years, a mere flash of what a man had seen and that flash could be waked to full recognition by sheer chance. Chase Harding was an unusually intelligent man. Out of the past might come that flash of Cabe Colee, grim and gaunt, just another Confederate soldier in the same room with a captured Union officer.

"No, you've never seen each other," Gale put in swiftly. He had to draw Harding's attention away from Colee instantly and the best and quickest way would be to draw the officer's anger onto himself. "How do you know you'll be allowed to wait for Red Cougar, Major? How do you know that the minute Washington gets your telegraphed report, forwarded from Department, that those War Department spurs won't come off their desks and ride your ribs for immediate action?"

A dull flush of rage commenced to mount under Harding's tan. Whenever white women or children were kidnaped by Indians public frenzy in the East always surged to a climax, and Washington gave out hurried, often ill-advised orders to the nearest post commander. Without a doubt the War Department would be on Harding's back, goading and demanding. His next promotion easily could hang on the success of his actions now.

"Miss Duane seems to come from a family that is well-placed in Washington," Gale went on evenly. "We had some conversation on the driver's box before the Apaches attacked. If I could suggest—"

The major's clenched fist slammed on the desk. "Leave Miss Duane out of this. You happen to be a common stage driver, and she happens to be a lady."

Flicked too hard on the raw Major Chase Harding was reacting fast. Gale drew in a deep breath. Under the rough garb and the ravages of the years Diane Duane had spotted his Virginia gentility, and Harding might do the same. Then the floodgates of memory of that black night might easily be unlocked.

Harding went on, "You can forget Miss Daune. You brought her through, but bringing the stage through is your job. You won't see her again on this post. You can rest up your teams overnight and tomorrow morning you will roll your stage out of here. And keep your mouths shut, both of you. Any time I want suggestions from a stage driver and a shotgun guard on how to run my business I'll ask for them. Now clear out of this office. I have planning to do."

Yes, reckoned Gale as he and Colee went out onto the parade ground in the blazing late afternoon sunshine, he had gone too far with Major Chase Harding. He had infuriated him by wounding his pride and had made bad blood between them in his new identity as stage driver.

He kicked savagely at a twist of mesquite root in the dust and flung a backward glance at the cottage in Officers' Row into which Mrs. Captain Jenkins had guided Diane. There was no sign of anyone on the porch or at the windows. To Diane, stricken by her loss, Chase Harding would be a tower of strength on which to lean, and inevitably she would yield to his proposal of marriage.

"Where we headin', Johnny?" asked Colee, moving beside him.

"Sutler's store. I want a bath and a drink."

"I can use one myself. If I'd had a good jolt of mountain shine inside me

back there my knife would of gone into that bluebelly and thar'd be one less skunk in the world."

GALE'S eyes clouded with thought. "You can't afford to kill the major, Cabe. He's a god fighting man and a brilliant soldier. We need him alive to bring Sally back. He's on our side now. We won't go to railhead with that stage tomorrow. We'll find some teamster here in the fort to drive it while we stay on somehow and make our own plans to get Sally back if Major Harding doesn't take any action. He's deep and he's clever and he's totally unscrupulous, as we both know from experience. He may come up with something remarkable. So I figure we'll stick on here. Are you with me?"

"I am that, Johnny, and you know it."

The sudden blast of a bugle traveling over the dreary post made Gale turn at the veranda of the sutler's store. The trumpeter stood on Headquarters porch, instrument to lips, waking the echoes.

"Officers' Call, Cabe. That means Harding has found his plan."

And whatever that plan might be, Gale knew that there would be something in it to Major Chase Harding's advantage.

CHAPTER IV

With The Major in Command

IN THE wash of a high-riding desert moon, swinging through a blue-black sky that burned with myriad stars, the parade ground stretched before Gale in an expanse of silver and shadows. It was a night of sheer Southwest splendor, but to him there was no beauty in it. He and Cabe Colee sat on packing boxes against the wall of the sutler's store and Colee's deadly-keen knife was whittling steadily through a block of white pine, piling the shavings at his feet. There was hatred in Colee's heart and there was depression in Gale's mind. Chase Harding, he had to admit, was right. There was nothing to do but wait while nerves stretched tighter and tighter. And if they stretched so tight they broke, as Colee's had almost done already, what would happen?

No guffaws and loud conversation of troopers at their beer came from inside the sutler's store with its rough bar. No soldiers were in there; behind the lighted windows of the barracks they had been readying their equipment for hours. Ever since Harding's officers had gone out of Headquarters with their orders the fort had been in a state of quick, efficient tension; it was a post splendidly in hand that had gone into high gear with the alert. Gale could tell a good army post when he saw one and this one under Harding, he had to confess, was the best he had yet seen.

On the porch of the Jenkins cottage a soldier appeared and struck out across the parade ground at a smart military gait. He came past the lighted front of Headquarters headed for the sutler's store and Gale felt his pulses tingling with a new anticipation. The soldier pulled up in front of him. He was young and personable-looking.

"Mr. Johnstone Gale?"

"Correct," said Gale.

"I am Captain Jenkins' orderly. Compliments of Miss Diane Duane, and would Mr. Gale be good enough to come to the cottage for a talk with her."

"Message received, soldier," said Gale and rose. "Thanks. I'll carry my own answer immediately."

"You are a mighty polite Yank," stated Colee. "In fact, you are the only polite bluebelly I ever met. You must of been born recently."

"Shut up, Gabe, and come along," ordered Gale, and they swung into pace.

Gale's feet seemed to be moving faster and faster, carrying him as rapidly as he could travel toward the cottage where a figure in white stood on the porch, waiting for him. He was going to meet another man's girl with as much excitement as though she had been his own. Through the open door of Headquarters as he

passed he could see into Major Chase Harding's sanctum where several officers sat with Harding at his desk. The major was talking quietly, with confidence and authority in his handsome face. The scene drifted out behind Gale and the next moment he was facing Diane on the cottage porch.

"I came as fast as I could," he said.

"I knew you would. Of course I wanted to see you again. This waiting is terrible, isn't it?"

"It's all we can do," returned Gale.

A pallor in Diane's face made her lovelier than ever in the moonlight, but there were lines of weariness and strain about her mouth and eyes that he meant to make every effort to banish.

"You can have every confidence in Major Harding," he told her. He's a splendid post commander with a brilliant record, and he knows Indians. There couldn't be a better man in any effort made to get your sister back."

He loathed himself for his words, but the girl looked easier. Here he was, praising the man he hated, building him up in the mind of the only girl to whom he himself had ever felt powerfully attracted, ruining his own hand to give Harding a winning one. But, after all, what hand did a wrecked Virginia gentleman, become a frontier drifter, have to play with any girl?

"You make me feel better," she said. "It takes a man to put the proper value on another man. I'm glad you admire Chase Harding so."

There was a racking, disgusted cough from the edge of the porch. Cabe Colee sat a few feet away, whittling again.

"They don't make them like him often."

"They suttinly do not, ma'am," said Colee.

DIANE said gratefully, "Thank you, Colee. Somehow I feel that with Major Harding in charge everything will come out all right."

"Somethin' is comin' out right now," said Colee, his head up. "Lissen."

"Halt, who goes there?" Down at the gate Gale saw the sentry, his carbine leveled into outer darkness. "Officer of the Guard! Post Number One! Apaches!"

From the guardhouse next to the gate figures erupted and lined the opening.

"Advance!" In the light of the guard lantern the leading Apache rider came through. He carried a branch in his hand from which dangled a blur of white cloth.

"Harding guessed it right," said Gale. "Here comes the Apache with the flag of truce."

The officer of the guard and two troopers closed in about the rider who sent his pony along at a fast walk for Headquarters. Two more troopers escorted the short, squat Apache who followed. As they passed the cottage porch Gale caught Diane's gasp at sight of the white object that hung by its strings from the mesquite branch. It was a flag of truce, all right, and it said everything.

"Sally's bonnet!"

"And thar is the Injun I seen scoop her up," said Colee.

Tall on his pony the Apache went on and Diane caught Gale by the arm. "Quickly! They're going to Headquarters. I'm going, too."

She swept from the porch at a run, following the guard group, and Gale went with her, his mind racing. Major Harding would never allow Colee and himself to be present at the coming council. He'd order them thrown out of his office. But he had a clear mental picture of the Headquarters layout.

"We'll let you go on alone from here," Miss Diane," he said as Headquarters loomed up. "Major Harding won't allow civilians at a meeting like this. We'll manage some other way."

She went on and Gale steered Colee on a diagonal course.

"There's a rear window in Headquarters opening behind Harding's desk," he said swiftly. "Through it we can hear and see everything. Nobody will see us. They'll have eyes only for the Apaches."

Rounding the corner of the building Gale motioned Colee to take his stance across from him at the open window.

The Apaches had been brought into the office and Diane swept in and stood by the wall behind them. Harding's officers sat and stood around the room, waiting expectantly.

"I am Draga," said the tall Indian in broken English. He lifted the stick with the dangling bonnet. "White man's flag of truce. Law of war."

"I see what your flag of truce is," said Harding. His well-drilled back in front of Gale was stiff. "You can state your proposition. I take it you will return the little girl to us unharmed if we meet your terms?"

"Fort nantan speak short and true." In the lamplight Draga's face showed savage and unrelenting. "Draga speak short and true for Red Cougar. Red Cougar send small white girl to fort, no harm, if fort nantan do one thing."

"One thing?" Surprise rode Harding's voice.

"Red Cougar's braves travel far north sometimes, long, long, journey. Indians of north travel far south sometimes to hunt, and they meet. Indians of north tell of fort nantan—you, white chief—make mighty war against them, mightiest paleface chief of them all. Red Cougar does not want mightiest paleface chief fighting him here in south on Apache lands. Red Cougar say—"

"Yes?"

"Fort nantan leave fort. Go back where came from. Let white chiefs in big tepee send another nantan to fort to fight Red Cougar."

"What?" burst out Harding incredulously.

"Fort nantan hear what Red Cougar say."

"Red Cougar demands that I quit here and go back to Washington, while Washington sends out another fort commander to fight him as his terms for returning the little girl?"

Draga nodded curtly.

"And if I refuse to leave this fort?"

"Small white girl stay with Apaches rest of life. Red Cougar send her back into mountains far away with squaws. Small white girl live Apache, get to think Apache, makum squaw of young Apache when grow tall. Red Cougar plan all out. Wise chief."

RED COUGAR was that, thought Gale, shuddering. He was a deep-thinking, deep-planning savage leader with an uncanny instinct for the weaknesses of his opponents. White men would pay practically any price for the return of white women and children prisoners. The price in this case was the sacrifice by Major Chase Harding of all his hopes for immediate promotion, a complete block, and perhaps destruction of his personal ambitions.

Washington would understand it if he quit at Fort Harrison to obtain the freedom of little Sally Duane, but nothing would ever kill the certainty of the ugly rumor that he had quit under fire. There would be no gold braid and a generalcy for Major Chase Harding—ever. An ambitious, driving man like Harding was sure to have enemies who would make the most of their chance to malign him.

Surprise was in every expression in the room. Gale stole a glance at Colee. His face in the lamplight that streamed from the window was ghastly.

"Oh!" The silence broke with the cry from Diane. She moved forward swiftly toward the Indian. "You—you wouldn't make my sister into an Apache! You couldn't be so cruel!"

Not a muscle moved in Draga's face. It was that of an emotionless, copper-brown torturer.

"Draga do what Red Cougar say. Nantan?"

He tossed the question almost casually at Harding, and Harding's head jerked back.

"Draga," he said, "I want time to think this out. I will give you my decision as soon as I can. In the meanwhile, you and your companion will be well taken care of in this fort . . . Captain Tomlinson—" he spoke to the capable-looking Officer of the Day—"you and your troopers escort these Indians to the officers' mess hall and see

that they have plenty of hot coffee, tobacco and food. I shall send for them when I want them. That is all for the moment, gentlemen. I wish to see Miss Diane alone."

Impassively the Apaches walked from the room with their escort and the officers followed, the last one closing the door to the outer office behind him. Harding rose from his desk and moved to Diane, standing sideward to the window, so that now Gale could see the expression on his face. It was steely, and Gale knew he was confronting the big decision of his life.

"Chase!" Diane pleaded. "You won't let them keep Sally! A little Indian—an Apache's squaw!"

"Diane, I will do everything that is humanly possible to get Sally back safe."

"Then you'll resign here? And the three of us will go back to Washington? You'll give up—"

"My career as a soldier? It's the only living I know."

"But I—I have plenty for us both. For any business you might want to start."

Here she was, this glowing girl, offering herself and all she had to a ruthlessly ambitious man to save her sister. Any lingering doubts in her mind as to whether she would marry Major Chase Harding had been swept away by the cruel current of events. A crimson film seemed to hover before Johnstone Gale's eyes.

"I can't see it that way, Diane," Harding said. "But I have another plan. It was half-formed, based on my hopes for a messenger from Red Cougar. I never dreamed he would send Draga. It's a marvelous break in the luck."

"Break in the luck?"

"Draga is Red Cougar's own brother. Red Cougar figures that he knows me and the way I'll react to his proposition, but I figure that I know Red Cougar in return. We've pitted our brains against each other before now, and a white man's brain will always win over that of a savage. That's all I want to tell you, Diane. Please have confidence in me and go back to Mrs. Captain Jenkins' cottage."

Diane put a hand limply to her forehead.

"I—I will have confidence in you, Chase, even if I don't understand what you're saying. I'll go to the cottage. Come to me when you can, will you?"

"In twenty-four hours, Diane, I expect to have Sally back here untouched in this fort. And after that, by heaven, I'll hunt Red Cougar down like the wild beast he is and stamp him out!"

Harding stepped to the door and opened it. Diane slipped out and Harding strode back to his desk. In his face was a dark and evil triumph. Gale knew now that the man cared nothing whatever for Sally Duane. She had become a helpless pawn in a struggle for power between Red Cougar and Major Chase Harding.

CHAPTER IV

"Damn the Flag of Truce!"

DESPERATELY Gale wanted to see Diane again alone, but somehow he sensed that events were moving to a climax in Headquarters office. Indecision tore at him. Harding had about him the look of a man who was going into action. He reached his desk and opened the top drawer. From it he drew a bottle of whisky and a glass and poured himself a huge shot. The liquor went down smoothly and he breathed in enjoyment. He took a cigar out of the box on the desk, lighted it and sat down in his chair, sending a fragrant cloud of smoke toward the fly-specked ceiling. He was the picture of a successful man, taking his ease after a hard day's work, satisfactorily completed. He put down the cigar and called:

"Sergeant-major!"

The noncom appeared in the door at once.

"Send the sentry to the officers' mess hall. Tell Captain Tomlinson to bring those two Apaches back here."

A moment later Tomlinson and his troopers escorted Draga and his squat companion into the room.

"Captain Tomlinson! Strip those prisoners of their arms!"

"Prisoners!" The snarl came from Draga as hands ripped the long knives from his belt and that of the other Indian. "Apaches no prisoners. Law of war. White man's flag of truce."

"Damn the law of war! Laws were made to be broken in time of emergency. You gave me Red Cougar's terms, now I'm giving you mine. I'm locking you up in the guardhouse and if Red Cougar doesn't deliver the little girl to me safely I'll hang you from the watchtower at sundown tomorrow."

A long and terrible hissing come from Draga. His eyes glared with concentrated fury. Harding went on, "I know what you Apaches believe. That when an Apache is hanged his spirit can't get out of his body to join its fellows in the Happy Hunting Grounds. Red Cougar isn't going to let anything like that happen to his own brother. Red Cougar made the biggest mistake of his life when he sent you to this fort to treat with me, instead of sending some ordinary Indian."

"Fork tongue! White nantan is fork tongue!"

"Never mind the forked tongue. You've get my terms. I'll release your companion here to take them to Red Cougar. If Red Cougar is lurking close by, and I think he is, he can be back here by dawn with his answer. Well?"

Draga's hand went to his empty knife sheath and fell away.

"Fork tongue win. Red Cougar will give up small white girl to get brother back."

"Then here's how we'll do it," Harding said harshly. "Out yonder about a mile south of this fort is that rock and sand. I'll come out with whatever troops I care to bring and meet Red Cougar with whatever force of Apaches he chooses to lead, just short of the ridge on the open desert where there's no cover. A single trooper will escort you, Draga, out between the lines and exchange you for the little girl, brought out by an Apache from Red Cougar's side. After the exchange both forces can go back where they came from."

Draga growled sullenly, "Red Cougar will take nantan's plan. Draga tell messenger so." He barked in Apache at his companion who nodded.

"Take them away, Captain Tomlinson," ordered Harding. "Give the messenger his pony and start him off. Lock Draga up."

The room cleared swiftly and Harding stood alone. Overmastering rage swept Gale, and memories of the past surged in a flood as he stared at Major Chase Harding in this, his hour of triumph. From beside him at the window came a harsh ejaculation wrung from Cabe Colee:

"The dirty hound dog! The stinking coyote!"

Harding caught the spoken words and his glance flashed to the window that framed Gale and Colee. There was no hope of further concealment now. His eyes glittered.

"You damned spies!" he snarled.

"In, Colee!" rasped Gale and himself plunged through the window and up to Harding, stopping short.

"You call a man a spy, Major Chase Harding? You've run true to form. You've done it again, broken the honorable laws of war. You're a dirty dog!"

HARDING'S fist gripped the gun butt at his belt. "I'll take no talk like that from a couple of stage-coach hands! Get the hell out of here, both of you!"

"Stage-coach hands now, yes, but we weren't always that. Do you recognize us with the dust off our faces? Think back to the war and the night you were captured at Three Oaks, Maryland. Captain Chase Harding, the man who saved Washington."

"That—that scar—"

"It's new, but the rest of my face is the same. We're Captain Johnstone Gale and Sergeant Cabe Colee of Jubal Early's cavalry scouts that ran into your small patrol and captured you. Colee was your guard until you gave your parole to me. Remember us now?"

The light of recollection flared in Harding's eyes. "Yes."

"We were short-handed and you gave your word of honor as an officer and gen-

tleman that you wouldn't try to escape. We were billeted in a farmhouse and I sent you upstairs when an officer from Old Jube's staff arrived. Somehow you heard him explain the course of action, you heard him report that Old Jube with twenty-five thousand men was out of the Valley of Virginia behind us and into Maryland and that speed meant everything in the race for Washington."

"The stovepipe led up from the living room through the bedroom," said Harding. "It was loose where it came through the floor and, lying down, I caught all your conversation."

"So before dawn when we were all asleep you went out the window and down to our picket line wearing the sidearms I had returned to you. You shot and killed the stable sentry in cold blood, mounted a horse and rode for it. You warned the capital in time to get the Union troops out to oppose us. You saved Washington by your broken word of honor."

"All's fair in war," said Harding brutally. "I simply released myself from a promise I didn't want to make. You'd killed or captured my whole patrol. I alone had the means of escaping."

"And you had the means of murder in your hand," Colee grated. "That was my son, my seventeen-year-old boy on sentry go that you shot without warning. From that day on, Harding, this world couldn't be big enough for the two of us in case I caught up to you. We've got blood feuds in the mountains that never die."

"Steady, Cabe," warned Gale. "I have a few things to say yet to Major Chase Harding. Now you know us, Major, and we know you for the rat in a blue uniform you are. You've played Red Cougar the same treacherous trick you played on me. Major Chase Harding wouldn't stand for a delay in his career to save a white girl, he chose to win through by foul means—by violating a flag of truce."

"I won, didn't I?" Harding's teeth showed whitely in the light of the overhead lamp. "The end justifies the means, doesn't it? Do you think I'd wreck my career for a moppet?"

"You—" The savage oath burst from Colee, but before he could leap for Harding, Gale moved in front of him.

Colee's body smashed into Gale's back and projected him forward. The room swam in a haze of crimson such as he had known in the full fury of battle, and through the haze loomed Harding's face, cruel and exultant. The barrier of will power that all along had been holding back his inner emotion broke and his knotted fist drove straight and clean for Harding's jaw. He felt the impact jar his arm to the elbow.

Harding reeled back under the blow. His shoulders struck the wall behind him and stopped him. He was braced and his hand went sideward. It came up and gunfire reared. The slug cracked past Gale's cheek. Harding swerved his aim and fired past Gale, this time at Colee, leaping with his knife out. Colee caromed against Gale and off to the side. And then the room was filled with uniforms.

"Cover these men!" shouted Harding.

The carbines of two Headquarters detail troopers menaced Gale and Colee. Colee dropped the knife clattering to the floor.

"I damn near had you, bluebelly," he croaked. "And I give you the first chance. There'll come a next time."

"There won't be any next time," snarled Harding. "The two of you are guilty of attempting to kill a United States Army post commander in his own office in time of war. If I wanted to order you shot out of hand I could do so. Instead, I am jailing you until after dawn at which time I am sending you to railhead under armed guard for shipment to Department headquarters and trial. I'll prepare the written charges and there are witnesses to Colee's knife there on the floor . . . Sergeant O'Hara!"

A VILLAINOUS-LOOKING noncom who had pressed into the front rank of onlookers came to attention. His piglike eyes were close-set and bloodshot, his meaty jaw was outthrust. He had the look of a brute who had taken up soldiering for

a profession because he liked to kill. Every army had such men, Gale knew, and they had their uses.

"I was passing by when I heard the shooting, Major," said O'Hara in a gravelly voice. "So I came right in."

"Good! Gale and Colee, Sergeant O'Hara will take the pair of you on horseback, hands and feet tied, across the desert to railroad. Sergeant O'Hara does not like Rebel ex-soldiers. He was noncom in charge of the deadline at the toughest Union prison camp of all. I believe it had the highest mortality rate of any Union prison camp. Am I right, O'Hara?"

"Yis, sor. Our mortality rate among prisoners trying escape was the highest of all."

"I'll have final instructions for you before you start the ride, Sergeant. In the meantime, march these men to the guardhouse and lock them up. That's all, Gale and Colee. We won't meet again."

O'Hara jammed his gun in Gale's back. "Start walking, Reb. Or do I give the frog's march to the pair of you?"

Gale shrugged hopelessly and walked out of the room with O'Hara and two troopers, carbines at the ready, for the covering guard. It was useless to say anything, almost useless to try to think. Major Chase Harding was planning secretly and well to protect himself. They reached the guardhouse and entered the main room.

"More prisoners, Captain," O'Hara reported to Tomlinson. "Which cell?"

"Number Two. What's the charge?"

"Trying to murder the major. They ride to railhead in the morning on the way to Department for trial."

"Ride to railhead in the morning?" repeated Tomlinson incredulously. "With Red Cougar out? That'll call for a big escort of cavalry we haven't got."

"The major's got his own ideas, sor. Forward!"

Gale and Colee were shoved down a short hall and through an open door into a roomy cell with strongly-barred windows. O'Hara gestured the troopers with him to withdraw and stood in the door, gloating.

"Yis, the major's got his own ideas. Only Sergeant O'Hara to guard two dangerous prisoners. And if you two dangerous prisoners make one false move to escape the vultures will take over."

"I think I understand," said Gale. "I can imagine what Major Harding's final instructions to you will be. You'll see to it that we make the false move."

"There's a gully like a burying trench about five miles from the fort." O'Hara said, and leered. "Once before there was a sad incident happened there. So now pleasant dreams."

He slammed the heavy door behind him and its outside bar clashed down. Gale walked wearily to the window and stared out between its iron bars, set in a sill of thick wood. The whinnying and hoof-thumping of restive horses came from the remount corral a hundred yards away and from overhead on the firing platform sounded the beat of sentry's boots. There were no other noises, the desert lay in limitless, moonlit silence.

"You figger that bluebelly skunk meant what he said, or was he just trying to throw a fit into us, Johnny?" asked Colee.

"I think he knows what Harding wants," returned Gale. "I think he is going to get a hint from Harding that will be more than enough. Major Harding can't afford to have us on the witness stand in our own defense. It would bring out our testimony that we'd met before, and how. Major Chase Harding, the man who saved Washington, a parole breaker. He can't stand for that on any court records, even if he swears himself blue in the face that we're liars. No, Cabe, he wants us out of the way, and O'Hara's a handy tool. In his own office he shot at us both and missed." He gripped the bar before him and worked on it uselessly. "No way out of here for us, Cabe."

A dull and dragging silence fell. Then the faintest of sounds came, a tiny clashing, and Gale's head snapped up.

"Metal on metal," he said. "Steel on iron in the next cell. Maybe there is a way out."

BETWEEN the two cells rose a wall of logs, but it failed to reach the roof. It was a partition higher than a man's head with open space, barred by slats, left between it and the ceiling for ventilation. Gale stepped over to it.

"Give me a hand up, Cabe."

Colee cupped his hands and Gale put his foot in the improvised stirrup. Cabe lifted and Gale caught the top of the partition and drew himself up, looking over it through the slats into a cell similar to his own. But at the window of the cell a figure crouched, cutting and slicing at the wooden window sill. The wood was coming away in huge slivers. Now and then the knife struck against the iron bar and the clashing sound followed.

"It's Draga," Gale whispered down to Colee. "Cutting his way out with a second knife he must have had hidden in a moccasin. He's almost through."

At the window Draga stopped slashing, thrust his blade back into his knee-high leg covering and yanked at the bars. They pulled out of the sill and the way was clear. One instant Draga stood in the dim shadows of the cell, the next he was a shadow himself that vanished through the window.

"He's free and running for it, Cabe."

"Halt! Halt or I fire!"

The sentry's feet thumped overhead on the firing platform, the alarm rang loudly. Then a carbine crashed.

"Prisoner escaping! Apache escaping!"

The carbine crashed again and another carbine farther away burst into a roar.

"Get him!"

Gale leaped down from Colee's support and raced to the window of his own cell. Out on the desert, hardly fifty yards distant, lay a motionless figure crumpled in the moonlight. Captain Tomlinson and troopers of the guard were running out of the gate toward it. Tomlinson barked an order and two troopers picked up the body by shoulders and legs and started back for the fort.

"Now just what?" grunted Colee.

"Now Harding has no Draga to trade for Sally. And that is just plain hell. When Red Cougar finds out that his brother has been shot and killed—"

"It'll be the end of Sally," Colee said harshly.

"That's it."

Gale came away from the window as the guard entered the gate. As he stood by the partition wall he could hear Draga's bearers shouldering along the corridor with their burden and into the next cell. There was a thump as the body hit the floor, then came Captain Tomlinson's voice.

"That's all, men. Send a runner to Headquarters to notify Major Harding."

"You won't have to, Tomlinson," came Harding's voice, and Gale caught the sound of his entrance into the cell. "I heard the shots and came here immediately. That's Draga on the floor?"

"Dead as a doornail. Broke out and the sentries got him."

"Blast his heathen soul!" Harding cursed deep and gratingly. "Nothing but a dead body to trade for the little girl. And what do you figure Red Cougar will do about that?"

"I figure the same as you do, Major. The poor kid out yonder in Red Cougar's hands is finished. And there's nothing, absolutely nothing, we can do about it."

"I'll find a way. By heaven, I'll find a way to trick Red Cougar yet! He doesn't know that Draga is dead and he has no way of knowing it before we meet. He'll come to the ridge with Sally. We've got that to work on. And we'll be there to meet him."

"But he'll be expecting Draga alive and unhurt."

"I'll work on that, too. Come along to Headquarters."

Colee had joined Gale silently by the log partition and Gale stepped away as the door to Draga's cell slammed behind Harding's withdrawal.

"What does that bluebellied devil think he can do?" Colee asked huskily.

"I don't know," said Gale. "But he's got an extraordinary mind, and he knows Indians. Whatever he thinks up to save his own reputation will be deep and it will

be dirty. He means to meet Red Cougar on schedule out on the ridge that's hardly a mile south of the fort. I have a vague recollection of noticing it as we drove in. So, Cabe, there's one thing we ourselves can do."

COLEE looked up sharply. "Huh?"

"The way's clear to escape from the next cell. Harding and Tomlinson didn't bother to think about us in here on the other side of the partition. They had too much else to think about." Gale pointed to the top of the log barrier. "These slats aren't for strength; they're for ventilation. The two of us pulling on them can work them loose and drop through into Draga's cell. Then it's out the window as soon as the moon darkens. We won't be making for the remount corral to steal a horse like Draga did. We'll creep along the base of the stockade, invisible from the firing platform, and go out to the east before we begin to make the circle."

"Circle?" repeated Colee.

"To the ridge. We're going to be right in the middle of Harding's rendezvous with Red Cougar, only no one will see us."

"Johnny, you are a bright young man."

They piled the cots on top of each other, climbed on them and wrenched at the slats which came away easily. Then they were dropping into Draga's cell with the shadows deepening fast as the cloud rack drifted across the moon. The open loomed and Gale made for it and readied for the jump. Colee stopped.

"What's the mater, Cabe?" Gale asked sharply.

"Hunting for this the Injun hid in his moccasin leg." Colee held up the bone-hafted knife with the long, cruel blade. "It's better'n the one I had and somehow I got a seventh son's hunch I'll see it sticking out of Harding's guts yet. Jump, Johnny and I'll foller in trace."

Gale went out the window onto the soft sand in a night gone pitch-black and began to creep soundlessly along the base of the stockade wall.

CHAPTER V

Macabre Rendezvous

THEY had made it. The moon was out again from behind the clouds, making the desert almost as clear as day, but it had held its period of blackness long enough for Gale and Colee to make their dash from the corner of the fort into the broken land and the long circle afterward. Now the contours of the ridge loomed ahead and there was respite, time for thought and planning.

Gale's feet moved heavily through the thick sand. Whatever thought he had was weary and confused. He had no plan except to let events take their course and be guided by any opportunity that offered. He plodded on and the ground began to rise to the crest of the ridge. Black outcroppings of malpais came under foot and here and there great slabs of rock, drifted by sand, blocked the path. The old caution, born of years of war, rose in him.

"Hands and knees to the crest, Cabe. No standing up on it in this moonlight."

They wormed the last of the way and lay flat.

"What d'you expect to see, Johnny?"

"I don't know what I expect to see, Cabe. I don't know anything except that I reckon we belong here, rather than stealing a couple of horses from the remount corral and heading for railhead and the old drifting again."

"Sure we belong here, Johnny," grated Colee. "Thar's Sally. And thar's the bluebelly skunk major that this Injun knife has got to go into yet. I don't see nothing coming and you can see from here nigh to Mexico City."

For miles the desert stretched in a flat floor to the south and there was no movement on it. After all, no time had been set for Red Cougar's arrival at the ridge. He might be twenty miles away, thirty even. Gale got to his feet. Not far away mesquite grew thickly in a rock crevice

and other clumps of vegetation dotted the crest and south slope.

"In there is where we hole up, Cabe. Take that knife of yours and cut more mesquite branches. We can make a screen that'll hide us from every angle."

They set to work and the time passed slowly. The stars began to pale and soon the violent blood-red dawn would rush across the wasteland. Suddenly Colee stiffened.

"To the south, Johnny. Looks like a black cloud moving over the sand."

Gale stared and knew cold in the pit of his stomach. The far blur did look like a cloud stretched out in a wide crescent with horns at its tips, and it was moving steadily for the ridge. It was at least two miles away.

"If that's Red Cougar and his horsemen he's got every Apache south of the Border with him," said Colee. "That's three-four hundred horse in that parade. Damn the moon!"

Driven by the predawn breeze the cloud formation rode in a tremendous bank across the sky and light failed. When it came on after a long quarter of an hour the movement on the desert was much closer and Gale could make out the forms of riders. But now they were in a small mass and the big crescent had disappeared.

"No three-four hundred there, Cabe," said Gale. "Moonlight can play queer tricks on your eyes. What looked like a big force of riders must have been a lot of elongated shadows. There's probably about a hundred of them."

The Apaches advanced slowly and a group of scouts out ahead reached the top of the ridge, studied the empty land toward the fort and waved the main body on. Crouched low in a place of perfect concealment Gale and Colee watched the riders reach the southern base of the ridge and halt. There was a scurrying to and fro of dismounted Indians, heaping up dead brush and loose branches. Then the fire sprang into life, throwing its glow onto savage, paint-streaked faces and half-naked bodies. The scouts on the crest walked their ponies down the slope and broke into an easy canter for the fort.

"The fire will tell the fort that Red Cougar's here," said Gale. "And the scouts have gone ahead to tell the fort from a safe distance what the arrangements are. There's Red Cougar."

IN THE firelight loomed a big Apache with a barrel chest and heavy, muscular limbs. His bearing carried an air of supreme confidence and authority and he moved with amazing agility. Red Cougar was like his name; he was a superb fighting animal with a chief's keen brain. His unusually reddish face was granitic in its cold ruthlessness.

"No tougher Indian ever walked in moccasin leather," said Gale. "He won't take Draga's killing lying down."

He felt Colee's fingers gripping his arm so hard it hurt. "That's Sally, Johnny. In that squaw's arms, wrapped in a blanket."

By the fire sat a thickset squaw with long braids hanging down her buckskin shirt. In her arms Gale saw the bundle and the white blur of Sally's face. The little girl made no motion and no sound.

"Asleep from fright and exhaustion, Cabe," said Gale. "After all, it's the best thing for her."

"And how do we get her out?"

"What we do will have to be according to what happens." Gale felt a ghastly frustration and helplessness sweeping him, but he fought against it desperately. "Harding will have a trick up his sleeve, we know, and you can't tell me Red Cougar hasn't a trick of his own."

What it would be he could not fathom. Red Cougar with one hundred braves faced a fort with three hundred troopers, a massed fire power he couldn't overcome. From the direction of the fort sounded the thud of hooves and the Apache scouts, riding fast, came into view and up and over the ridge. Now, in a few moments, he would know plenty.

The scouts swung down to Red Cougar and jabbered at him. Red Cougar flung his arm aloft and in turn barked his orders. His Indians jumped to their ponies and in single file the entire band rode up

over the ridge a safe fifty yards from Gale and on down to the flatland at the base of the outcropping. The last of the night was lifting and the view to the fort began to clear rapidly. In the distant stockade a bugle sounded. That meant Harding and his escort cavalry were coming.

Minutes passed and full dawn swept the wasteland in its glowing light. The fort lay plain to see and its gate was open for a column emerging with two canvas-covered wagons in its rear. The troopers rode in files of two abreast with a figure well out in advance in the point of command and two riders side by side behind him. The column moved at a slow walk that was torture to Gale. But still it came on, a hundred and fifty strong, and behind it the desert stretched empty to the stockade of the fort. Harding signaled and a point of three troopers broke from the column and raced out ahead in a half circle. Their course took them level with the ridge and a little to its rear. Harding was no fool. The point would establish the fact that Red Cougar had no mass of Apaches lurking in ambush behind the ridge, and only two Indians left at the fire.

The point waved the all clear with the column still a considerable distance away. Harding gestured and the formation began to draw up into a skirmish line that came to a halt some three hundred yards from the ridge, with the wagons on the flanks. Below on the flatland Red Cougar had formed his horsemen into a similar line.

"What's in them wagons, Johnny?" whispered Colee. "Presents of blankets and likker for Red Cougar out of Harding's kind heart?"

Gale stared at the nearest wagon and its canvas tilt was lifted a little from its base. He could make a good guess at what those wagons held.

"They've got presents in them all right, Cabe. But not blankets and liquor. A load of flaming hell."

Below them Red Cougar rode his pony a few yards out from the Apache line and raised his hand in the air. Harding raised his hand in return signal. An Apache moved forward, leading a pony by its rope, and on the pony sat the squaw with Sally wrapped in her blanket.

"Thar goes the arrangement, Johnny. Each side sends out its prisoner with a single escort. So where's Draga?"

"Behind Harding," said Gale. He could make out the noncom in blue and the Indian pony with its rider stiffly erect on its back. "Christopher, has he got a nerve! That's Draga in a specially-rigged McClellan saddle, lashed to a pole hidden by his body that's nailed to the cantle to keep him upright, feet tied under him. He's riding dead but at a distance he looks alive. It's such a colossal bluff it may work. Sergeant O'Hara's the escort."

CAREFULLY the big noncom was walking his cavalry mount and leading Draga's pony. At the distance from the ridge there was no way to tell that it was a dead man riding.

"And what happens when they meet and the Apache guard sees he's getting a dead Injun in return for a live white child?"

"I reckon when the Apache sounds the alarm O'Hara will pistol him, grab Sally from the squaw and run for it. Red Cougar can't charge after him into the face of a hundred and fifty carbines. Harding has laid a beautiful ambush."

"And O'Hara is smart. He's not hurrying any and risking upsetting that corpse. But somebody else is hurrying, Johnny, from the fort. Coming hell-for-leather."

A quarter of a mile behind the blue line the rider tore, finishing the last of the distance from the stockade. Rider and mount slipped through the skirmish line of cavalry and drove on for the rendezvous between the lines. Harding shouted and spurred forward in a desperate try for interception that missed. And now Gale could see who the rider was.

"Diane! It's Diane Duane!"

Diane charged on and drew level with O'Hara and Draga. She passed them and the Apache leading the squaw's pony stopped, instantly alert.

"She couldn't wait at the fort! She's going to get Sally herself!"

Diane pulled her horse down in a violent rein-up and stopped alongside the squaw. She dropped her reins and held out her arms. The Apache nodded to the squaw and she passed her blanketed burden over to Diane. A child's high, thin cry of joy carried across the desert.

"Diane has got her, Johnny! The kid's safe!"

The scream of a horse in shock traveled almost with Sally's cry. The pony carrying Draga's body reared and screamed again and its lead rope broke away from O'Hara as he went for his gun and fired at the ground.

"Rattlesnake, Johnny! Either struck the horse or scared it half to death. It's loose with Draga!"

Frenzied with fear the pony drove for the group that held Sally, stormed past them and on for the ridge with the body of Draga swaying drunkenly on its back. Then suddenly the corpse pitched sideward as the whole saddle loosened and slid over, with Draga dragging in the dust. The weight pulled the frightened horse down and two Apaches caught it in front of Red Cougar. He gave a single glance at the body lashed to the pole and his voice rose in a tremendous shout that carried over the ridge to the Indians left at the fire. They screamed back and swung a blanket over the blaze.

"Red Cougar knows now," Gale said tensely. "He'll be out to kill."

"So will that skunk O'Hara be."

CHAPTER VI

Blood on the Desert

ON THE desert O'Hara was spurring forward, gun high, at the Apache leading Diane's horse. The squaw howled in alarm and thudded her moccasins into her pony's flanks, cutting off O'Hara. The non-com's Colt crashed and the squaw toppled onto the sand but her scream had been enough. The Apache had whirled his pony and was off for Red Cougar's line, Diane sitting helplessly in her saddle with the child in her arms occupying both her hands.

Red Cougar yelled again and a dozen rifles cracked. O'Hara slumped as the fusillade hit and rolled off his horse's back. He was a lifeless lump only yards from the squaw he had shot. On raced the Apache leading Diane's mount and pulled up in front of Red Cougar. He snarled a sentence and Red Cougar pointed to the ridge behind him. Gale followed his finger and saw the balls of black smoke bursting into the air from the fire where the pair of Apaches worked the blanket.

"Smoke signal, Johnny," said Colee. "But who in blazes is thar for Red Cougar to signal to?"

Red Cougar's face was terrible in its fury as he stared at the body of his brother, untied now from the pole and saddle and stretched on the sand. His Apaches stood still and in the distance there was no movement in the line of blue from the fort. A totally unexpected catastrophe had struck Harding's plan, it came to Gale, and both sides were waiting to see what the other would do first. It was the stalemate of shock.

"Red Cougar can't attack against Harding's strength," said Gale. "And Harding hasn't got the power to overwhelm Red Cougar in a charge. Red Cougar would simply run for it, and he'd probably kill Diane and Sally first for revenge."

At Red Cougar's wave the Apaches holding Diane's horse led it back into the lee of a huge flat rock. Red Cougar screamed and the rifles of his braves broke into a steady clatter, firing at the distant cavalry. But the range was too great, no targets were being hit. Smoke bellied in turn from the blue line and lead whipped into the sand of the ridge and ricocheted off its rocks. Then the firing slackened on both sides.

Puzzlement sifted in on Gale, joined with despair. What was Red Cougar trying to do? Pin Harding down at long range in a useless fight? Why didn't he turn and run for the Border with his prisoners in-

stead of putting them under cover in his rear as though he meant to stand and shoot it out? Diane and Sally were safe enough behind the big rock with a pair of Apaches guarding them. Unarmed except for a single knife between them, all he and Colee could do was watch. He felt Colee pressing his shoulder and turned to look behind.

"Ah!"

The exclamation forced itself between his lips as he saw the two Apaches who had been tending the fire coming up the rear slope of the ridge in single file, walking their ponies. They would pass within yards of the mesquite-screened crevice where Gale and Colee hid. And each of the Indians had a rifle slung on his back.

"Mounts and guns, Cabe," Gale whispered in Colee's ear. "And mounts and guns are what we need. You take the first with your knife. I'll use this as they pass."

He picked up the heavy splinter of malpais rock and balanced it in his hand as Colee nodded grimly. There were tense seconds of waiting and then the Apaches went past. Brushing aside the loose mesquite Gale sprang for his target as Colee leaped by him and clean onto the back of the leading Indian's pony. Above Gale loomed his Apache's face, eyes wide with surprise, and straight between the redskin's eyes Gale flung his missile. It struck full and he heard the splintering of bone.

The Apache went off his horse in a sliding fall into Gale's arms and Gale stretched him on the sand. Colee sat astride the Apache's pony and its rider lay prone with a terrible wound driven into his back. He'd never known it when Colee's knife had hit him. Gale swung up and onto his pony, rifle in hand.

"Now what, Johnny?" said Colee.

"We try to sneak down on those Injuns guarding Diane and Sally. If Harding attacks—" His gaze lifted from the formation of Apaches and traveled northward. Horror gripped him. "Harding won't attack! Harding is being ambushed from the rear by the horns of the crescent we took for shadows! That was a real cloud of hundreds of riders that cut off to the flanks when the moon darkened, circled ahead fast and hid north of the fort among the gullies and sand dunes! Here they come past the sides of the fort they used to screen them from Harding!"

TEARING down on Harding's rear came the two plumes of dust with the forms of riders growing larger in the velocity of the charge. The main mass of Red Cougar's concealed force was still over a mile away but it was coursing at full gallop and storming onto the major's back in twin columns aimed to tear his flanks apart and annihilate him while Red Cougar pinned him down in front. Whatever warning shots had been loosed from the fort had been drowned out by the firing at the ridge that still went on spasmodically. The deep-laid plan of a savage chief was sweeping into success before Gale's stricken eyes.

"No—no!" he shouted as the mad idea struck. "Cabe, we're going through to Harding!"

"Just how, Johnny?"

Gale raised his rifle. Hardly a hundred yards away was the boulder with its Indian guards and prisoners. The Apaches were looking around its edges. Gale's sight came onto the back of one.

"Pick off the Apache on the left when I give the command, Cabe. Then ride like hell for the rock. You ready?"

Colee's eyes glinted along his rifle barrel. "Ready, Johnny."

"Fire!"

The two weapons cracked like one and both Indians dropped. Gale slammed his heels into his mount and bucketed crazily down the slope. Out on the desert the spears of Red Cougar's ambush had passed the fort and still Harding's blue line, unknowing, faced south. Diane's face turned toward Gale and Colee and shock was in her eyes as she stood by her horse.

"Diane, mount! Cabe, take Sally!"

In another instant of downhill gallop they reached the rock and Colee, reaching low, swung Sally up before him. Diane was in saddle, poised and ready.

"Hang onto Uncle Cabe, Sally," said Colee. "We are going for a ride."

"Forward!" snapped Gale and drove heels again.

The trio burst out around the corner of the boulder and rushed for the rear of Red Cougar's line. The shots that had felled the Apache guards had gone unheard and for the first time hope surged in Gale. He had a vision of half-stripped brown bodies on ponies, his ears caught a chaos of startled yells and then they were through the thin line of Apaches with open desert reaching to Harding's cavalry. But beyond that cavalry Red Cougar's ambush from the north was plunging hard. The canvas tilts were off the flanking wagons now and Gale could see what was mounted on their beds. He ripped his hat from his head and waved it wildly with the wagon crews looking at him. His voice could carry the distance.

"Wagons, look behind you! Gatlings, open up to the north! Ambush! Ambush!"

The wagon crews turned to look, then instantly swung their multiple-barreled guns. Roaring into a terrific crescendo at Gale's cry, without even an order from Harding, the Gatlings loosed their fire in scythelike sweeps that took the heads of the nearing Apache columns full and chopped them off. Colee rode out in front of Gale with Sally's arms about his neck and he had one arm around her. Diane galloped behind him.

Red Cougar and his Apaches were yelling and gesticulating in crazy rage, but they were not following. Gale and Diane and Colee with Sally were going to make Harding's line before battle overwhelmed it. And then terrific shock coursed through Gale, and he was flying through midair and landing with a crash that drove half the breath from his body. Off to the side on the sand lay Diane, thrown like himself, and the pony with the broken bone protruding from its foreleg lay beside her. One more desert pothole had claimed a galloping horse and Gale's pony, following had driven straight into it and come its own cropper before it could swerve.

Gale wrenched himself to his feet and plunged for his downed horse. But it was up, frantic with fear, and stampeding for Harding's cavalry. A wild screeching rose from the Apaches as Red Cougar brandished his lance and at full speed started his charge for Gale and Diane, thirty or more savages at his back. Gale went cold all over and stepped up to the broken-legged, screaming pony. His rifle cracked and the horse went limp, its agony ended by a merciful bullet through the head.

"Lie down back of the pony, Diane. We're trapped!"

AS THE girl slipped in beside him he flattened himself behind the barricade of horseflesh and let his first shot go at the charging Apaches. In his last moments of life he wanted Red Cougar but other Indians on faster ponies had cut in between him and the chief who rode in the ruck. There would be no mercy now—Red Cougar was out to kill both him and Diane.

He saw an Apache plunge to the ground, fired again, and somewhere a bugle blew madly. The world was a maelstrom of thudding hooves and savage screams with the smashing roar of the Gatlings to his rear riding over all. He raced the lever of his rifle, flinging shot after shot, and the hammer fell on an empty magazine. In front of him the Apache charge loomed, covering the last few yards, and he braced himself for its deadly shock.

Then a wave of blue rushed past him on both sides, the foam-flecked nostrils of charging cavalry horses shot by and yelling troopers, pistols and sabers out, stormed into the face of Red Cougar's onset. Tall in the saddle rode Harding, the battle fury on his face, and as the cavalry charge smashed against the Apache ponies Red Cougar was slim, lance in hand and driving for Harding. With a flick of his wrist Harding parried the thrust, swung his saber and slashed Red Cougar clean off his pony's back with a beautiful crosscut that took him in the side of the head.

One instant it seemed to Gale that he lived in black pistol smoke and flashing

sabers, the next the remnant of Red Cougar's charge was breaking in leaderless confusion for the south with Harding, reined down, waving his force into pursuit. The Gatlings on the wagons went into a final roar and muted. Far out on the desert on the flanks Apaches rode desperately for safety in stricken rout and beyond the wagons, mowed down by the Gatling's merciless fire that had shattered their surprise attack, their dead littered the ground.

Harding walked his horse up to Gale and Diane, risen now to her feet, and dismounted. "Thank heaven, we made it, Diane. I took the chance with a platoon when Red Cougar came for you."

"Yes," said Gale. "You made it." Traitorous and utterly unscrupulous Harding might be, but he was a born cavalry leader.

"As for you, Gale," Harding went on, "you did a good job. I'll pass up your jailbreak and the charges against you, but you and your ruffian friend, Colee, will be out of the fort by noon. I don't want you around."

"I don't reckon as I care to be around, neither," Colee said, sitting his pony a few yards away. "Sally's in the lines safe, Miss Diane. I give her over to a trooper and rode with this bluebelly's charge."

Harding glared at him. "Keep your mouth closed, I tell you. Yes, Diane, Sally's safe and the war's over. Red Cougar's dead and we hit his Apaches so hard with those machine-guns they'll be no further menace. Without a leader they'll just disintegrate."

"Red Cougar ain't so dead," said Colee and pointed. "It takes more'n one strike to knock out an Injun like him."

Staggering, Red Cougar was rising from the sand, one hand to his head where a huge welt from Harding's blow showed. He was half-stunned but coming to fast with an Indian's amazing powers of recuperation, and an overwhelming hatred glittered in his eyes.

"Saber turned in my hand," said Harding. "Got him with the flat instead of the edge. I don't want him around either to escape from the reservation or jail and start his war all over again. Here's the second strike."

He drew his Colt from its holster and fired coolly. Red Cougar shuddered as the bullet thudded into his breastbone. He teetered for a second, and fell on his face.

"You dirty hound dog!" snarled Colee. "Murdering an unarmed prisoner like yuh murdered my son, you—"

"Damn you, Colee!" foamed Harding, carried away by his fury. "I'll put the charges back against you. Or, by heaven, I'll shoot you here and now for battlefield insubordination!"

He lifted his sixgun and Colee's hand went to Draga's bone-hafted knife at his belt. Desperately Gale leaped forward to put himself between the two men. He grabbed Harding's wrist and held it out to the side so that his gun pointed into the sand, squeezing savagely. Harding winced with pain and his teeth bared in overmastering rage.

"All right, Gale," he grated. "I'll get you, too!"

With a wrench that broke Gale's grip he tore away and stood free, leveling again but this time at Gale's head.

"Chase—Chase!" broke out Diane. "Are you mad?"

HARDING never even glanced at her. His fury and enmity had burst all bounds and Gale saw before him a man who had gone kill-crazy.

"Look at Red Cougar again, Harding," called Colee. "Your second strike warn't enough. He is on your back."

Harding whirled. On the sand directly behind him, crawling on hands and knees, came Red Cougar. Blood dribbled from his tight-clamped mouth. He was dying and he knew it, but in his last moment he had the strength to kill his enemy. He stopped, braced himself on his left hand on the ground and his right went back over his shoulder. Something gleamed in it. Harding's shot crashed and a hole burst in Red Cougar's forehead. But the thing that had been in his right hand was on its way, a thin blade of steel that

flickered in the sunlight and slammed into Harding's breast. Both men pitched forward and Harding rolled onto his back, the bone-handled Indian knife protruding from his heart. Gale looked at Colee whose hand rested lightly on his empty knife sheath.

"Cabe!"

"You was in the way, wrassling with Harding, Johnny," said Colee in a low, calm voice. "He aimed to get you. Red Cougar was up, so I tossed it to him. That close he couldn't miss. And he had as good a blood feud with Harding as I did."

"Yes," said Gale, "he did." Colee had spoken so low that Diane could not hear him. "Diane, this is going to be hard on you. It's the tragedy of the frontier. You never know from one hour to the next who you're going to lose."

"I can't feel I've lost Harding to Red Cougar," Diane said evenly. "He lost himself to me when he violated the flag of truce for the sake of personal ambition. How could I respect a man who had no honor, only a sense of expediency, no matter what his other qualities? And where there's no respect for a man, how can there be any deeper feeling? I'm free now, free and clear of everything except my debt to you. Harding told me what he did to you. I couldn't trust him, so I came for Sally myself. You're free and clear, too. There's not a living soul to press charges against you and Colee."

The troopers who had followed the Apaches at Harding's order were trotting back from the top of the ridge where they had watched the last of Red Cougar's rout disappear in the distance, headed for the Border. They were returning to a scene that spoke for itself. Red Cougar, left behind playing dead, and Harding had fought it out, Colt against knife, in a last bitter duel, and both had lost. They'd give Harding the highest military funeral possible, Gale thought grimly, and he'd be known as the man who had saved the Border from Red Cougar's war as well as the man who saved Washington.

Let them pile another honor on a man who had no honor of his own. There was no reason Gale should ever tell Diane or anyone else of that night of broken parole in Maryland years ago. Harding was dead, he no longer stood in his way.

"Yes," he said, "we're clear. Clear for a new life in a new country."

"With—with—"

"Colee and—"

Their eyes locked and Diane's were glowing with unspoken invitation. She had never loved Harding, Gale realized. There was someone else now that she more than respected and admired. It was the beginning of the new life already.

"With you, I hope," he finished.

Her smile told him that his hope would be fulfilled and that the bleak, lonely years were gone forever.

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Wyatt Earp cracked Curly Bill over the head with his gun barrel

Duel in the Dust

A True Story by D. AYDELOTTE

"WYATT EARP'S in town!"

Had the Angel Gabriel himself, with his trumpet sounding doom, descended upon Tombstone, he could not have been less welcome. For a moment the click of faro chips, the slap of greasy cards on saloon tables, was halted. At the bars, men set down their drinks untasted, or tossed off more, and mumbled drunken threats. The madames and their painted girls felt a chill of foreboding as they heard that name. Even hardened cutthroats and hired killers wondered, uneasily, if they hadn't better hunt other diggings while they were still in one piece.

Down in the San Pedro Valley, ferocious Old Man Clanton cursed in his long white beard as he heard of Wyatt's coming. He and his three cattle-rustling sons wanted no frontier marshal trying to fence them in. Further down the valley, Frank and Tom McLowery, both reputed pure poison

Blood ran red in Tombstone when the Earps met the Clanton-McLowery gang

on the draw, swore by all things unholy that Wyatt Earp would never lay a hand on them.

In Tombstone, cocky little Johnny Behan shined up his sheriff's star and strutted importantly to show he wasn't scared of Wyatt Earp. Johnny was nobody's fool; he could tell a cholla from a prickly pear any day. But, as a .22-calibre man in a .45-calibre town, he faced tough competition from this tall, gaunt officer named Earp, with his hair tawny as a lion's mane, wide-swept blonde mustache, keen blue-gray eyes, and a firm granitic jaw. For if Wyatt Earp found out about the sheriff's chummy relations with the Clantons and McLowerys and their assorted traveling partners, he would be Johnny-out-of-a-job.

Wyatt Earp had scarcely brushed the dust of Tombstone from his boots when Old Man Clanton and four hand-picked bravos ambushed a Mexican mule train loaded with smuggled silver, and shot down the smugglers to the last man, escaping with the loot. A youth whose three brothers had fallen before the gang's murderous rifle fire, plotted quick revenge.

He had not long to wait. After raiding a ranch across the Border, Old Man Clanton and several of his bully-boys camped in a narrow, rock-walled canyon. As men huddled around a smoldering fire in the cold, rainy dawn, hidden marksmen mowed them down. Leaping from his wagon, the Old Man himself went sprawling in the mud. Blood from a bullet wound in one temple trickled down his long white beard. Leaving the dead where they lay, the Mexicans retrieved their stolen herds and hurried back over the Border.

With the Old Man's death, a rider of the owlhoot known as Curly Bill Brocius stepped into his place as leader. He and the McLowerys laid off cattle raids for a time as too unhealthy. When in Tombstone for a spree, they walked softly in the shadow of Wyatt Earp. But by the summer of 1880, graver mischief was afoot, grave mischief. The Bisbee mail stage was held up and robbed, the messenger wounded.

Sheriff's Dilemma

With a storm of angry protest breaking over his head, Sheriff Behan felt compelled to arrest two ring leaders who were a couple of friends—Frank Stilwell and Pete Spence, both members of the Clanton gang. It was only a token pinch, however, and their arrangement a mere formality. The two were about to be turned loose on bail when Wyatt Earp came charging in, his gray eyes blazing fury, his jawline stony-hard.

"You're under arrest," his deep voice boomed, "for robbing the United States mails!"

While the culprits gaped in slack-jawed discomfiture, he had them again arraigned and shoved behind bars, to face a serious Federal charge.

"See here, Wyatt," protested Johnny Behan, his round face angry-red, "you're horning in on my range."

He might as well have been a fly buzzing around Wyatt's tawny head. Earp merely turned on his heel without a word, and the two suspects stayed in jail.

Vowing to free Spence and Stilwell if they had to take the jail apart brick by brick, the Clanton boys, with Curly Bill and others of their blood-stained entourage, hit the trail for Tombstone. Loading up on gullet-scorching liquor, they were raising wild whoopee when Fred White, the town marshal, called for help.

"Wyatt," he said, "if you'll come along, we'll make those fellers simmer down."

At sight of the officers, Curly Bill's swarthy face darkened with rage. His gun barked savagely, and Fred White fell, mortally wounded. Curly Bill was no star-gazer, but he saw constellations a-plenty as Wyatt Earp cracked him over the head with his gun-barrel. Before his companions could fight or flee, they got a brisk pistol-whipping that laid them out cold on the barroom floor. After seeing them hauled off to the local calaboose, Wyatt Earp straightened his U. S. deputy marshal badge, dusted off his hands, and went back to his post.

Before Fred White died he gasped

weakly that Curly Bill had shot him by accident, implying that the bullet had been meant for Wyatt Earp. With Curly absolved in that deathbed statement, there was nothing to do but free the prisoners. With aching heads and sullen looks, the gang rode back to their Cochise County hideout, cursing the very ground that Wyatt Earp walked on, and plotting revenge. When Morgan Earp came to take Fred White's place as town marshal, with brother Virgil as deputy, the outlaws decided it was time to strike.

One crisp autumn day the Clantons and the McLowerys, with their followers, came spurring into Tombstone. Losing discretion with every drink, they boasted loudly that they were going to finish off the Earps, as well as that fancy-shooting friend of theirs, Doc Holliday. Swaggering around town in drunken bravado, Ike Clanton began shooting in the air. Ordered to give up his artillery, he insolently refused. Wyatt Earp clouted him over the head, confiscated his six-shooters, and told Ike he could claim them at the Grand Hotel when he was ready to leave town.

Infuriated by this insult to one of their clan, the gang took aboard a fresh cargo of drinks and made more violent threats. Told of what they were saying, Wyatt brushed it off as mere drunken braggadocio. But early next morning, a courier relayed this message to him:

> Tell the Earps we're waiting for them at the O. K. Corral, and they'd better come fight it out. And tell Wyatt Earp if he'll leave town, we'll let his brothers and Doc Holliday alone. But if he stays, we'll pick 'em off to the last man.

This challenge was the frontier equivalent of the duelist's, "Pistols at dawn, and name your seconds, gentlemen."

The courier was sent hotfooting back with word that the Earps would stand together and fight it out, man to man. This meant war to the death, and the Earps went well-heeled. A tall, impressive trio, look-alikes with their heavy yellow manes and tawny mustaches, the brothers came breezing around the corner of Fly's Photo Gallery. With them was the redoubtable Doc Holliday, frail and tubercular, but deadly quick on the trigger. Stony-faced and steely-eyed, they swung along like warriors on the march. Their boots thudded sharply on the board sidewalks.

Sixguns Speak

Sheriff Behan had been urging the gang to lay off the fight, and maybe later . . . But their seething hatred had come to a boil, and the outlaws refused to listen. Now, seeing the four fighting men approach, the sheriff tried to intervene. Shoving out his star-bedecked chest and trying to stand tall, the cocky little sheriff ordered:

"Wyatt, you boys go back. I'm here to disarm and arrest these boys, and I won't allow any fighting."

With maddening indifference, the Earp contingent strode past, leaving Behan sputtering. He trailed after them, repeating, "Now, let's not have any trouble. Go back and I'll tend to these boys." He prudently halted at a shop door, where he could duck inside when bullets started buzzing.

The Clantons and the McLowerys stood in the dusty street just outside the O. K. Corral. Spectacular in appearance they were, lean and sun-tanned, wearing white sombreros, flannel shirts, tight pants stuffed inside their half-boots. The autumn wind sent dust swirling above their heads. Their mounts, inside the corral, shifted restlessly.

On came the Earps and Doc Holliday, looking unafraid, into the graveyard muzzles of the rustler guns.

"You boys have been spoiling for a fight!" shouted Wyatt. "Now you can have it."

Sixguns spoke, and spoke again. Panicked by the explosions and drifts of acrid smoke, two horses broke loose and galloped around the corral, stirring up smothering clouds of dust.

In less than half a minute Tom McLowery lay dead, Frank was desperately wounded. But young Billy Clanton, though wounded, was gamely fighting on.

Helpless without his guns, Ike Clanton flung himself on Wyatt Earp and clung leechlike, trying to deflect his aim. Most men in Wyatt's place would have sent a bullet through Ike, but Earp only flung him aside.

"Get in the fight," he ordered, "or get away."

Ike took off in craven flight, hiding out in a Mexican dance hall.

With His Boots Off

His face drawn in agony and barely able to keep on his feet, Frank McLowery snarled, "You're the one I'm after, Doc. I got you now."

"You got me to get," taunted Doc Holliday, with his sardonic grin.

With a desperate effort Frank took aim, but as he squeezed trigger, Holliday quickly turned aside, his gaunt body offering a mere splinter of a target. A shot from Billy Clanton's gun struck Morgan Earp in the shoulder, and bowled him over. Staggering about blindly, but still as full of venom as a wounded rattlesnake, Frank McLowery crept closer.

"Look out there, Morg," warned Wyatt.

Rolling over on his side, Morgan took careful aim and fired. Frank McLowery fell dead, a bullet through his brain.

With both McLowerys dead and his brother Ike in cowardly retreat, young Billy Clanton, blond and handsome, fought a losing battle with the law. Too weak from loss of blood to stand, he crouched on his knees, hoarsely vowing he'd kill one of them before he had to die. Struck in the breast by a shot from Virgil Earp's weapon, he toppled backward. Too weak to turn on his side, the fighting youth made a last supreme effort. Prone on his back, he raised his gun, but the weapon wavered in his failing grasp. Then the six-shooter fell from his flaccid hand. As men came to lift him, he whispered, "Pull—my boots off," and died.

Wisps of gunsmoke still drifted over their heads as the victorious Earps departed, Doc Holliday holding onto Virgil, who had received a thigh wound, and Wyatt helping Morgan along. At the corner, Johnny Behan bustled out from his refuge in Fly's Photo Gallery. This was the little sheriff's great moment, and he made the most of it.

"Wyatt Earp," he intoned solemnly, "you're under arrest."

The stalwart officer looked down, grinning good-naturedly. "Not today, Johnny," he answered. "Maybe I'll let you arrest me tomorrow, but right now I'm getting Morg to a doctor."

He moved on imperturbably, a lion ignoring the angry snarls of a jackal.

Wyatt Earp's Way

Still aiming at .42-caliber stature, Johnny Behan demanded a jury trial. But like the villain of ancient melodrama, he was foiled again, the jurors quickly deciding that the Earps were within their rights as officers of the law. But feeling mounted against the brothers, and there were open threats of reprisal. While making his rounds as town marshal late one night, Virgil Earp was shot from ambush. Critically wounded, he eventually recovered, but limped on crutches with his left arm hanging helplessly.

On a Saturday night a few weeks later, Morgan Earp was chalking his cue for a game of billiards with the saloon's proprietor when bullets came crashing through the glass-paneled door. Morgan spun around, threw up his hands, and crumpled to the floor among shards of splintered glass. In the black darknes outside, pursuers heard only the thudding of boots on hard-packed earth.

Still conscious, Morgan greeted his brothers as they gathered around him.

"Bend over to me," he murmured to Wyatt, "I'm dying." And he whispered some word into his brother's ear.

Wyatt nodded grimly and clasped Morgan's hand. In the silence, a clock struck the hour of midnight. The dying man smiled. "The game's over," he said clearly —and was gone.

Wyatt Earp knew the men who had plotted Morgan's death—a stage-robber

named Frank Stilwell, another named Pete Spence, and an outlaw half-breed known as Indian Charlie. Like an avenging angel, he struck out on their trail. Spence holed up in Old Mexico and Indian Charlie vanished like a drift of smoke. Hiding out in Tucson, Stilwell planned to kill Wyatt when the lawman reached that town on his way to California with his brother Morgan's body. But Wyatt and his faithful shadow, Doc Holliday, swinging off the train at Tucson, glimpsed a lurking figure in the dusk, decided it was Stilwell, and fired. So Frank Stilwell died.

Vengeance swift and sure—that was Wyatt Earp's way.

With Morgan gone and Virgil still a semi-invalid, the Earps' enemies closed in like a wolf-pack, their jaws slavering for the kill. Wyatt announced that he was leaving Tombstone, town of bitter memories, shaking its dust from his boots forever. While Wyatt, with Doc Holliday and a few companions, were having a farewell drink at the Alhambra, Sheriff Behan came strutting in.

"I have warrants here," he blustered, "sworn out in Tucson, charging Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday with the murder of Frank Stilwell." With a sneer he added pompously, "I have come to arrest these men."

With a superb insolence, Wyatt Earp looked the little man over from top to toe and back again. Then his voice, deep and resonant, filled the room.

"Johnny Behan, you've been a snake in the grass ever since I landed here, and many's the time I've heard your rattles. I've treated you decently to avoid trouble, but now I'm through with you and your cutthroat gang. I despise you!" He snapped strong fingers under the discomfited sheriff's nose. "You can't arrest us and you know it!"

Dignified Retreat

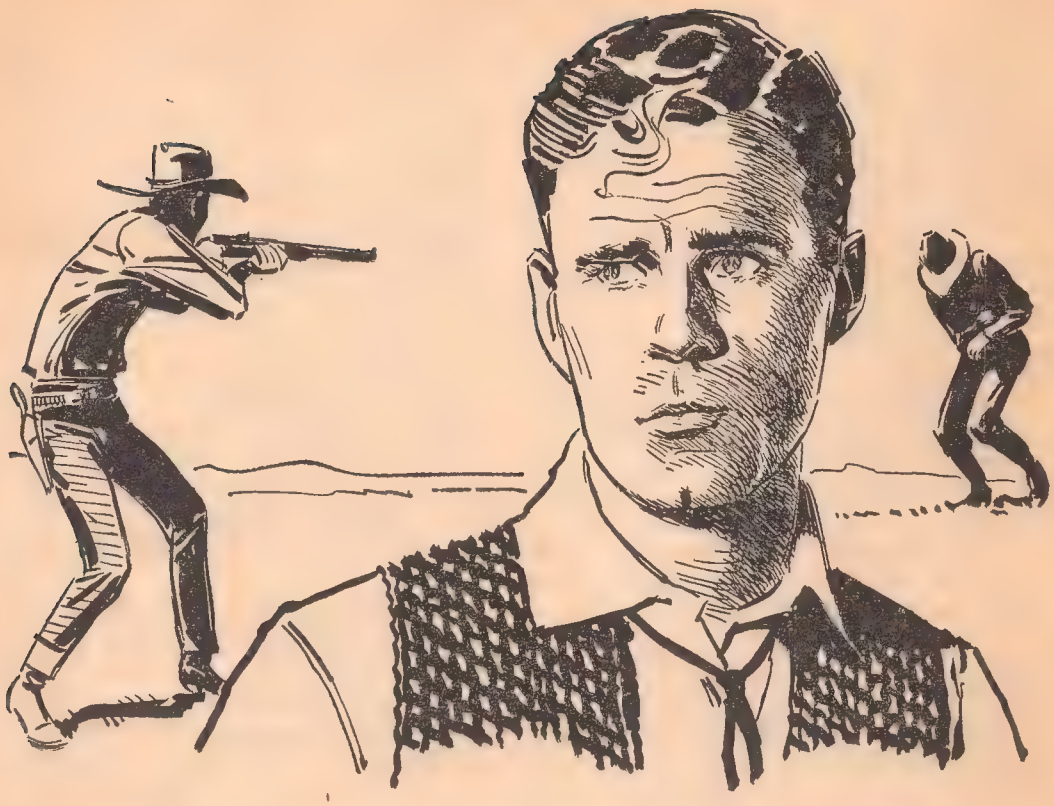
Brushing past the stunned sheriff, Earp and his friends unhitched their horses and vaulted into saddles. With Wyatt and the Doc ahead, the small procession moved out Allen Street, the horses held to a walk. Men filled with murderous hatred for the Earps lined up on the board walks to see their foe depart. There were muttered curses, glances of bitter enmity, but not a shot was fired. Erect in the saddle, Winchesters across their laps, Wyatt Earp and Doc Holliday rode between lines of silent enemies, their narrowed eyes watchful. Not till they reached the street's end did their measured pace quicken.

Wyatt Earp still had a few accounts to settle, the first with Indian Charlie. The half-breed was drilled through the head with one shot, while chopping wood in a remote hillside camp. Searchers found him lying as though asleep, head pillowed on one outflung arm.

Stubborn in defeat, Sheriff Behan refused to give up. Rounding up the scattered survivors of the Clanton-McLowery gangs, he swore them in as deputies to ride after Wyatt Earp and his party and bring them back as prisoners. While Behan set out with his bravos, Wyatt and his companions suddenly came upon Curly Bill and his outlaw entourage, watering their horses at Iron Springs. The roaring encounter ended with Curly Bill dead and his demoralized followers fleeing for their lives.

Trailing Wyatt Earp proved a futile quest. Ranchmen bluntly told Johnny they didn't know which way the Earp party had gone, and wouldn't tell him if they did know. Asked for Indian trackers to help locate the travelers, an army officer profanely refused help. Rebuffed, openly sneered at, the sheriff and his ungodly posse rode back to Tombstone, cringing at the derisive laughter, the taunts hurled from every side. Bitterest pill for Johnny Behan to swallow was when Governor Pitkin of Colorado refused to honor the requisition for Wyatt Earp, issued by the politically-minded governor of Arizona.

Wyatt Earp was gone from Tombstone, but the memory of his lionlike bravery long remained. He left an enduring mark on the town and countryside, and years after, even those who had hated him spoke his name in awed respect.



GUNMAN'S GUILT

By L. EDWARD THOMPSON

THAT morning County Prosecutor Jeff Shannon reined up at the wide gate and surveyed the rambling Double Bit spread. He sat tall in the saddle, a man not yet thirty, wearing a tailored frock coat and a 4-x stetson. It was a warm spring day and the rented gelding he rode had lathered some coming out from town. Jeff gave the animal a short breather, then roweled him into a easy canter and headed upland to ranch headquarters.

Although more accustomed to a desk at his office in town, the young lawyer rode with the ease and grace of a man at home in the saddle.

He dismounted at the rack in the yard, removed his soft leather gloves, and tucked them into the gullet of the saddle. He was moving across the shaded hardpack when Shirley Vorhees, daughter of the ranch manager of the Double Bit, pushed out the back door.

"Hi, Jeff," she called. She moved to-

Jeff Shannon traded his soul for money and a pretty girl—then tried to buy it back one day

ward him, swinging her hips from side to side attractively. "How's Tascosa's most important citizen today?"

Jeff looked for sarcasm in her clear gray eyes and, finding none, smiled and touched the brim of his hat. "Flatterer," he said. "But thanks all the same."

"I don't know," Shirley said. "Tomorrow's court day. You're trying Cap Wilson for murder, and right now Dad's inside, pacing the floor, waiting to see you. Seems to me you could call that pretty important."

Jeff glanced at the house, a little frown that creased his forehead working down to pull at the corners of his mouth. Shirley came close to him and looked up at him invitingly.

"Jeff," she said, "when this crazy busintss is all over, come back and see me. Just me, next time, not my father."

JEFF unconsciously stirred by the warmth of her nearness, looked down at her. She was dressed for riding—tight-fitting jeans and a white blouse, open at the neck. She was dark-skinned like her father, but there the resemblance ended.

"Thanks," he said. "I might just take you up on that."

Smiling, the girl swung off toward the corrals. Jeff read meaning into the easy lilt and sway of her graceful body. Too bad this was strictly a business call.

He turned and went directly into the large comfortable room at one corner to the main house which Milt Vorhees used as a ranch office.

Vorhees was standing in front of the cold fireplace with a drink in his hand, a dark heavy-set man with a little pouch beginning below his ribs and ending just above his low-slung belt.

"Jeff!" He blurted. "Have we got an open and shut case against Cap Wilson tomorrow?"

A muscle rippled in Jeff's jaw and his gaze measured the rancher for a moment. "You know we haven't, Milt. That wasn't the plan."

"Then it's got to be fixed," Vorhees said, frowning. He went over to the desk and sat down. "At the preliminary hearing I swore Wilson shot Purdy, and I'll swear it again tomorrow on the stand. Why isn't that enough to convict him?"

Jeff felt a quick disgust for this man who, as Oldham County's biggest taxpayer had been given the title of Boss.

"There are three other witnesses," Jeff said. "Each will testify that Cap Wilson was nowhere near your barn that day."

He sat down, and swung his gaze around the richly furnished room, gathering thought, then the thoughts came back to Vorhees behind the desk. "Milt, we locked Wilson up because you figured that would break the cowboys' strike, but we don't have enough evidence to convict him. You might just as well make up your mind to that."

"Then we'll have to get enough," Vorhees said emphatically. He flipped open the lid of a cigar box and held it out across his desk. Jeff shook his head and took a cigar from his own vest pocket. He lit it and snapped the match with his thumb.

Vorhees stared at him coldly. "Jeff," he said, with unexpected candor, "I don't own this place. I only manage it for that bunch back East." He bit the end off a fat cigar and chewed on the tobacco before spitting it onto the floor. "Easterners don't give a damn about the cattle trade, Jeff. All they care about is making money. That's why I've got to get my crew back and end this damn strike."

A slight wave of anger rose suddenly in Jeff Shannon. Vorhees made money for the syndicate. He did it by driving his men and animals to near exhaustion, working them around the clock in the spring and laying them off without pay in the fall. That was one reason Cap Wilson had called the strike, but there were other reasons, as Jeff well knew.

The anger spent itself in him and he said, "Milt, I'll never get a conviction, but Cap'll have to leave the territory. I'll see to that, and without him around your striking cowhands will give up. That's as far as I can go."

"Don't be a fool, Jeff. Cap won't leave.

He's an old man. If he's acquitted he'll stay and keep right on making trouble. I should have fired him long ago."

Jeff thought of the bitterness between these two. Publicly Cap had protested against Vorhees' high-handed methods at the ranch and last fall he had organized the whole crew in the most modern Eastern union methods, and had ridden off.

All the hands except an old-timer named Mat Purdy had gone with him. A month later Mat Purdy had been killed—shot in the back while working at the ranch. Vorhees had labeled it a spite killing, and had flatly accused Cap Wilson. He had turned so much suspicion on Cap that Jeff had been forced to lock the old man up.

Jeff glanced up at the rancher now. "What are you suggesting, Milt?"

"Full conviction," Vorhees stated casually. "To the limit of the law."

HUNTSVILLE Prison, Jeff thought. Huntsville or the hangman's noose; one was not much more than the other.

Jeff lifted the cigar to his mouth, maneuvered it from side to side, then took it out and looked down at the spongy end. He said, "Defense counsel's got three mighty good witnesses who'll swear Cap was playin' poker at the time Mat Purdy was killed."

Vorhees motioned off that argument with his hand. "Jeff, I'm not interested in that. I'm telling you to get a conviction. And I don't care how you do it—but do it!"

Jeff looked down at his hands, turned them over and rubbed the sweat from his palms. He had come a long way up the ladder—all the way from his father's dingy law office in town to a position of influence in the country. But he hadn't done it alone. Milton Vorhees had helped him a great deal and now Vorhees was demanding payment.

Jeff shifted uncomfortably in the chair. "I'll need to give it some thought," he said.

"Sure," Vorhees said, and turned slowly. "And, Jeff, get some help. Abe Martin's jury foreman. Maybe you ought to talk to him. Offer him whatever it takes . . . by the way, your old man being on the other side in this isn't going to make any difference is it, Jeff?"

Jeff pushed up out of his chair and walked to the window. "He's going to be tough as hell to beat," he said gravely. "That's the only difference it'll make."

Vorhees laughed. "With a fixed jury it shouldn't be too tough." He laughed again. "Just a minute, Jeff. I'll fix you a drink."

Vorhees went into the other room. Still standing at the window, Jeff's eyes were on the corral where Shirley Vorhees was working with a blooded bay. Jeff watched her. She was beautiful, Jeff thought. She'd be even more beautiful when she decided to discard those jeans and began to wear the kind of dresses she should wear. However, she was much the kind of girl Jeff had always imagined he would marry—if he ever did.

Milt Vorhees came back into the room carrying a bottle. He clamped wide-spaced teeth over the cork and yanked, poured drinks and handed one to Jeff.

As he corked the bottle again he asked, "Well, Jeff, is it a deal?"

Jeff tossed his head back and swallowed the sharp, stinging liquor. He wiped his mouth and headed for the door.

Vorhees shouted after him, "Jeff! I asked you if it was a deal."

Jeff said. "I drank on it, didn't I?"

Vorhees smiled. "I just wanted to hear you say it." He motioned with his glass. "You're coming to supper tonight. Be here about six. We'll go over everything then. In the meantime, see Abe Martin. You know how to handle Abe."

"Yeah," Jeff said. "I know."

He mounted his horse then and rode back into town. He had intended going straight to Abe Martin's but racked in front of his father's office instead, where he climbed to the second floor and moved slowly down a dim, squeaky corridor to a door where a sign read:

Shannon and Son, Attorneys at Law

The old man had never changed that sign; he never would.

Jeff hadn't been back in nearly a year and now the memory of those early days

came back to him. He recalled the jawing with clients who couldn't afford to pay, the counting of pennies so he could eat at least one square meal a day. Standing there Jeff almost turned back. Then grasping the knob he threw open the door and pushed briskly inside.

Ira Shannon sat at a large desk by the window. "Hello, Jeff," he said. "It's been a long time."

"Too long, I reckon," Jeff said.

"Sit down and tell me how you're coming along in the Purdy case."

"Thanks," Jeff said, seating himself. His father went into the next room and put on a shirt. Jeff could see past him to the dirty dishes and the black skillet on the kitchen table. The stale odor of the place reminded him that it hadn't changed.

IRA SHANNON came back, buttoning his shirt. He was a medium-built man with hair that curled into duck tails around his ears and down the back of his neck. He was a mild mannered individual, with an easy casualness which had not been repeated in the son who was of stricter makeup.

Jeff watched him tuck the shirt tail in and draw the galluses over his shoulders. "I've about decided old Cap's guilty, Dad," Jeff said. "He's hated Vorhees long enough."

"Is that so? Then why didn't he shoot Vorhees instead of Purdy?"

Jeff glanced up quickly. His old man wanted to discuss the pending case, a habit of lawyers.

"Old Cap felt strong about his cowboy union," the prosecutor told his father, "as strong here in the West as in any other section of the country. He shot Purdy because the old fellow wouldn't come in with the others."

"You've made up your mind to that, haven't you, son?"

"What else is there to think?" Jeff asked, a trace of sarcasm in his voice. He lit a cigar, offered one to his father, and sat back. Ira Shannon dragged a sand bucket across the floor for ashes and sat forward.

"You forget that Milt Vorhees fired *his* gun that day, too," he reminded.

"Vorhees explained that," Jeff said. "He saw Purdy's killer ride off and took a shot at him. I believe that."

"Maybe you've *got* to believe it, Jeff."

Jeff felt a quick restlessness. He sat forward, flicked ashes into the bucket, then got up and walked over to the bookcase and made a pretense of scanning the well-known titles.

Behind him the swivel chair squeaked, then Ira Shannon was standing beside him. "Jeff, nobody's going to get hurt tomorrow, are they?"

"What do you mean by that?"

The old man sighed. "Huntsville is a pest hole, Jeff. I sent a man there once and I've been sorry ever since. An older man has practically no chance at all down there.

"Jeff, I was mighty proud when you got elected to that county job. There was nothing here for you. . . ."

Jeff clamped the cigar between thin lips and stared straight ahead. Now comes the preaching, he thought. He closed his mind until he barely understood what the old man was saying. The past year slipped away and he was back here again, wearing the baggy suit and patched vest, working for five-dollar fees and glad to get them. In those days, Shirley Vorhees hadn't known he existed.

Jeff could have stood everything else, the meals of salt pork, and the second-hand clothes, knowing that some day they'd be a thing of the past, but he had not been able to stand being ignored by Shirley Vorhees, he never would.

"Jeff," his father was going on, "there's nothing wrong with bein' a public servant. Nothin' in the world. Long as you serve the public. But don't sell out, son. Don't sell out to Vorhees or you'll live to regret it."

Jeff turned and regarded his father keenly. The old man had left no doubt as to his meaning. "You always were good at preaching," Jeff said.

A flinty hardness came to his father's eyes. "Maybe I should have taken it up

sooner," he said.

Slow anger worked in Jeff as he moved to the door. He looked back. "No, Pop," he said, "preaching don't pay anything either." Jeff stalked out, closing the door quietly behind him.

He moved back down the stairs and onto the street outside. Squinting through the brightness of noon up toward the courthouse, he saw a few men in black business suits hanging around there, and recognized them as lawyers, in town for court session. They would be wanting to talk to him, but he would skip them for now. He'd had enough lawyer talk for one day.

Glancing down the other side of the street he saw Abe Martin, the jury foreman, sweeping the walk in front of his saddlery. Abe was a little man whose life could not be called an open book even now when he was past sixty. He marked saddle and leather goods up twenty per cent to the Double Bit so they went on the books that way for the Eastern owners; the twenty per cent was split with Milt Vorhees. Milt had worked out that deal with several local merchants. Jeff took a hitch in his hat brim and started down toward Martin.

THE street was empty except for a few lawyers and their clients who would still be talking far into the night. *Tomorrow* was the big day. Jeff saw familiar faces; men he'd met on this same circuit when he'd worked with his father. Riding circuit was tiring work. Jeff was glad that it was behind him. He had something better and he was going to hang onto it.

He motioned Abe Martin inside his saddlery and they moved to the back of the store to talk. Martin paled when Jeff told him that Vorhees had suggested a conviction tomorrow.

"But I don't like it, Jeff!" he protested. "I just don't!" His face twitched.

"Neither do I," Jeff said. "But if Vorhees swears he saw Purdy do it, I'm not callin' him a liar."

"No, I reckon we can't do that," Martin said.

"Then you know what to do," Jeff said. A bell rang at the front and a customer came in.

"I'll do all I can," Martin said, moving off. "But don't expect miracles. Not with those three witnesses for the defense."

It had turned dusk that evening when Jeff rode out to the Double Bit. As he dismounted he noticed three strange horses at the rack. Glancing toward the house, he saw a light in Vorhee's office. Other ranch men, Jeff decided, who were interested in the outcome of tomorrow's trial. Jeff's movements were slow and deliberate going up to the house. He had made up his mind to help Vorhees but his decision had done nothing to sooth the rasping harshness of his father's expressed views.

He knocked and Shirley came to the door. She was wearing a frilly red dress with a big sash at one hip. Jeff had rarely seen her in anything but jeans, and suddenly his mouth felt so dry he was speechless.

Shirley lifted to her toes and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

She stood back. "Surprised?"

Jeff stood there while she took his hat and gloves. "You can wash up, Jeff," she said. "Supper's about ready." She hung his hat on a hall peg and followed him to the wash room. "After supper I have another surprise for you, Jeff, so don't act so glum."

Washing his face and hands, Jeff smiled. He was anything but glum now. He had seen the richly decorated table and, with his early doubts fleeing, he realized that his choice was taking him where he wanted to go.

In the dining room, Milt Vorhees went to the head of the table and waved a hand hospitably.

"Sit down, Jeff," he said good naturedly. "Shirley got supper tonight. She's a darned good cook. You're in for a treat."

When they were seated Jeff unfolded the linen napkin and glanced across at Shirley. Yellow lamplight glinted in her eyes as she smiled back at him.

At the head of the table Vorhees held a fork to the thick steak and cut it with his

knife as he said, "How'd you make out in town, Jeff?"

Jeff took a long draught of wine and touched his mouth with the napkin. "Well, it's going to be awkward, Milt. No one expects a conviction. Not with those three witnesses to swear Cap was playing poker all afternoon."

Vorhees glanced at Shirley and smiled. She glanced at Jeff, then back at her father. "Stop teasing, Dad. Tell him the good news."

Jeff remembered the three horses at the rack. "Yeah," he said. "If there's something I'd ought to know—"

"Good news will keep," Vorhees said flatly.

They finished eating and drew their chairs back. "Now, Jeff," Vorhees said, as he went ahead of the others and opened his office door, "I guess I ought to let you in on something."

Inside, seated around the low fire, were three men Jeff recognized. They were Cap Wilson's men; the men Ira Shannon had supoenaed as witnesses.

VORHEES stood inside the door and gestured expansively. "Well, there you are, Jeff. You were worried about witnesses. We've got all three of them for you."

Jeff stood there, his gaze shifting from face to face. For more than a minute he didn't speak. So this was the surprise! And instantly Jeff knew the meaning of it. Vorhees had bought these men! He wasn't satisfied with a fixed jury, or a jury which might recommend leniency. Vorhees wanted more!

Violence gripped Jeff Shannon. He twisted suddenly, grabbing the ranch manager by the shirt. "By damn, Milt Vorhees, I ought to—"

"Stop! Jeff!" Shirley cried, springing between them. "Stop!" She struggled to push him back. "It was my idea, Jeff. I got them to come here."

Jeff's grip fell away and he stared down at her. His insides suddenly shook. "You?" he said.

"I persuaded them to change their testimony, Jeff." A smile of triumph curved Shirley's lips. "Don't you see? Cap Wilson will go to Huntsville or wherever they send them. The strike will end and everything will go back to normal again. You and I can spend some time together then!"

"But what if Cap's innocent?" Jeff shouted. "What then?"

She looked at him directly. "Were you thinking of that when you talked to Abe Martin this afternoon?"

The rich food Jeff had eaten and the wine he had drunk suddenly lay heavy in him. He felt dizzy as the warm room seemed to close in on to him. He moved toward the door, almost blind with anger. He was conscious of nothing else until at the corral, he lit a cigar, took a deep drag and felt the soothing bite of the tobacco. Glancing back at the house, he saw that the office was still lighted, and he could see Vorhees pacing up and down. The rich food rose in his throat like foul tasting acid. He saw Milton Vorhees differently now. He saw the man as he actually was —selfish, ruthless, one who used the power of the syndicate he served to further his own personal interests. And Shirley was like him! Jeff knew that now.

But Jeff's own willingness to become a part of their scheme was the really disturbing part of it all. It was a bitter awakening to realize that a man could be blind to his *own* selfishness if the stakes were high enough. And almost he had become one of them!

Shirley came onto the porch, looked around for Jeff, and went back inside. He turned away and stared into the blackness. He told himself, *You don't belong here. Go back to that law partnership with your old man. That's where you belong. Ride the circuit with the rest of them and collect your five dollar fees and count your pennies for one square meal a day.*

Jeff went back into the house for his hat and gloves and was leaving again as Milt Vorhees stepped into the hall.

"Jeff!" Vorhees thundered at him. "You try to welch on this deal and I'll ruin you! I'll swear it was all your idea, and I'll make it stick! I may go down but I'll damn

sure put you back where I found you."

Jeff planted his hat firmly on his head, and slipped on his gloves. "That threat doesn't scare me, Milt. I just realized it tonight. I'll realize it more tomorrow, for all the tomorrows to come and give thanks on my bended knees!"

Next day a coppery sun emphasized the stillness of Tascosa's Main Street where carriages were racked on either side as far down as the courthouse. In his father's office Jeff Shannon stood by the open window, looking out, the memory of last night still strong in him.

The crowd was beginning to go in now, and a sharp knock sounded at Jeff's door.

"Mr. Shannon," said the man who stood there. "Court's in session."

"Thanks, Bailiff," Jeff called to him.

Now there was no time left. All night Jeff had paced the floor, trying to find a way, searching his mind for one mistake Vorhees might have made, and which could hang the man. For he was sure now that Vorhees had killed Purdy. Vorhees was capable of anything so long as it served his own purpose.

JEFF moved to the door, the silent inner struggle nagging at him. He couldn't go into court now and accuse the powerful ranch manager of murder, not without positive evidence. And yet, he couldn't convict Cap Wilson for a crime the old man did not commit. That would be an open admission that Jeff Shannon had gone along with Vorhees all the way.

Aggravated by a blindness that would not clear, Jeff crossed the hall to the court room. The rapping of Judge Blankenship's gavel sounded as he seated himself at the prosecutor's table.

Vorhees, already there, smiled at him thinly. "Well, I reckon you changed your mind, Jeff," he murmured.

"No," Jeff said, not looking at Vorhees. "I haven't. I'll fix your wagon if I can just find a way."

"You try it," Vorhees grunted in challenge. "I promise you, I can stop anything you got in mind."

(Turn page)

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The sheriff led Cap Wilson, a thin, wiry man of sixty, his back stiff and straight as a poker, into the court room and seated him at the defense table. Cap blinked and stared in disbelief at the crowd that had gathered for his trial. Jeff remembered now that Cap had done some soldiering in Mexico, that he had lost one eye in the fighting there.

The judge rapped his gavel and his voice boomed instructions to the court. Jeff was thoughtful, only half-hearing. He gazed across at his father at the defense table and bowed his head a fraction of an inch. His gaze settled on Cap again whose good eye flicked furtively around the room, while the blind one stared deathlike at the table.

Suddenly a keen knife of hope cut across Jeff's consciousness. He saw the back of the barn. He took a Winchester out of his saddle-boot and came across the field toward Mat Purdy who was putting in a post in the yard. I thought nothin' of it till I saw his gun muzzle poking around the corner of the barn."

"Which corner?" Jeff asked. He tugged at his ear and looked down. He seemed to know where he was going now.

"Why, it was the northeast corner," Vorhees said.

"Then what happened?" Jeff said.

"Then the gun went off and Purdy doubled over holding his side. I grabbed my own gun and ran into the yard and fired at Wilson. But by this time he had hightailed."

"Your gun is also a Winchester and of the same caliber that killed Purdy. Is that right?"

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shape of this trial; the preliminaries the questioning of witnesses and finally the cross examination. Jeff knew that by throwing doubt upon Vorhees' testimony, he might get an acquittal for Cap. Even though it was Jeff's purpose to prosecute. But, throwing doubt upon Vorhees' testimoney would have to be done without Vorhees knowing it.

Jeff frowned thoughtfully down at the floor. In short order the preliminaries were out of the way, the jury had been accepted, and Vorhees was on the stand.

"Mr. Vorhees," Jeff said, "just state in your own words what happened out at the Double Bit that afternoon when Matthew Purdy was killed."

Vorhees sat forward. "Well, I was sittin' in my office at the ranch when I saw Cap Wilson pull up at a stand of trees out

Vorhees nodded.

Jeff turned quickly to Cap Wilson. "Will you step forward, Mr. Wilson?"

Cap came forward.

"Mr. Wilson, suppose this table here is the barn Mr. Vorhees is speaking of. Let's say that you're approaching from the southeast with intentions of killing a man on the other side of the barn. Show the court how you would go about it."

Cap hesitated and looked down at Ira Shannon. The old attorney smiled faintly. "Go ahead, Cap. Do what he says."

Without hesitating longer Cap moved to the corner of the table, raised his elbow and sighted down an imaginary gun-barrel.

Jeff began to breath easier. He looked at Vorhees. "Now, Mr. Vorhees, is that the position you saw Mr. Wilson take?"

A sudden pallor spread across Vorhees' face and his lips trembled. He realized too late that he had overlooked something.

YEAH—yeah it was," he said.

"But you said he went to the northeast corner."

"I was mistaken. I just remember."

"You just remember that Cap Wilson is blind in one eye. That he shoots a rifle left-handed. You took it for granted that he fired a gun the way you do, you naturally assumed that he would go to the northeast corner of the barn because that's the corner you went to. You killed Mat Purdy, Vorhees. Admit it!"

Some instinct warned Jeff. Then he saw Vorhees rising out of the witness chair, his hand disappearing into the sleeve of his coat. Jeff saw the hideout then, a small 41 derringer, the most deadly of weapons at close range.

Jeff dived for the man's feet just as the sheriff came toward Vorhees from the other side. The gun sounded in Jeff's ear and splintered wood at his feet. Then he had his hand on the gun and was twisting it from Vorhees' grip.

A few moments later Vorhees was being led from the room and Judge Blankenship rose on the bench. He clapped his gavel roughly on the boards and looked down at the jury.

"I suggest gentlemen, that in view of the circumstances you bring back a verdict of not guilty." He rapped again. "Court's recessed for fifteen minutes."

As the jury filed out Ira Shannon turned his gray head toward his son and took a crumpled bill from his pocket.

"Here, Jeff," he said. "You did all the work today. You deserve the fee."

Jeff looked down and studied the bill. He thought, Five dollars. Five dollars for appearing as counsel in a murder charge.

But it was a symbol, he decided, a symbol of the kind of fee a self-respecting lawyer sometimes accepted for his services.

He took the bill and put it away and then clapping his father on the shoulder said, "Come on, Pop. Come across to the Stockman's and I'll buy you a drink."

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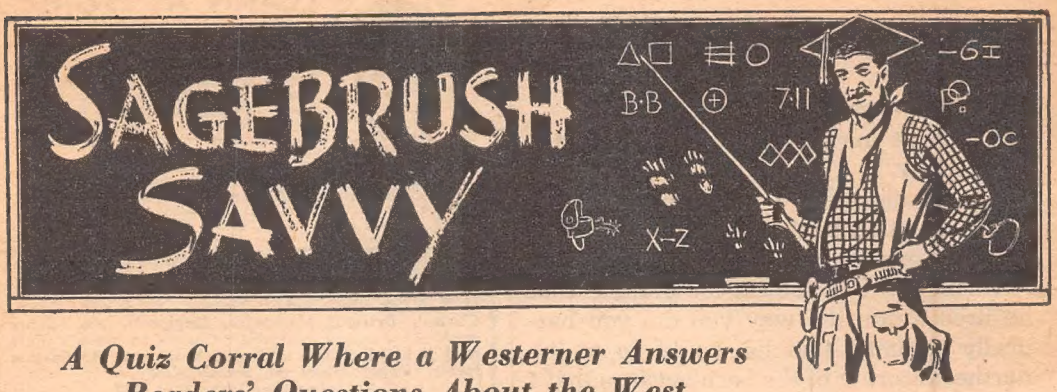

A Quiz Corral Where a Westerner Answers Readers' Questions About the West

Q.—Are there still any of those Western towns like you see in cowboy movies and television, and where would they be located?—P.L. (N.Y.).

A.—Picturesque though they were, the mining camps and cowtowns of the Old West have changed to suit the age of automobiles, electricity and other modern conveniences just like any place else, but many of them do still retain some of the same old false-front buildings and Western atmosphere. A few ghost towns or parts of other settlements once wild and woolly have been restored to their Old West appearance as historic monuments to a great and glorious past. Probably the most notable restoration of this sort is Virginia City, Montana. Some aspects of their gun-smoky heyday are also preserved in Lincoln, N.M., Tombstone and Bisbee, Ariz., Creede, Colo. and elsewhere. Also many Indian Pueblos and Spanish-American villages in New Mexico still look very much as they did a hundred or even several hundred years ago. In such abandoned "ghost towns" as Aurora, Nevada, Bland, N.M., Bodie, Calif., etc., many of the original buildings still stand, although deserted and falling to ruin. Tourist road maps usually indicate locations of such places for the visitor's benefit.

Q.—Did the Indians use stone form implements, if so when did they begin and are there any books about it?—J.K.W. (Ky.).

A.—Yes, all Western Indian tribes, including the prehistoric, fashioned implements of stone. Stone hatchets, hammers, *metates* (may-TAH-tays) for grinding corn, etc. have been found in ruins and cliff dwellings so ancient that no one knows exactly when the use of stone implements first began. Certainly it was many thousand years ago. I can list only a few books on the subject in this limited space: "Treasure In the Dust," by Frank C. Hibben, "Indians of the Americas," by Edwin R. Embree, "Indians of the Southwest," by P. E. Goddard, "Ancient Life In the American Southwest," by Edgar L. Hewett, "Masked Gods," by Frank Waters. Your best bet for complete, accurate information would be to write to Dr. Frank H. H. Roberts, Department of Archeology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., for a list of their publications on the subject.

Q.—Where did the so-called Buffalo Hunters War take place?—R. M. (Calif.)

A.—In the Texas Panhandle, in 1877, when the Comanches tried to wipe out the last of the big-time buffalo hunters.

Q.—Are any participants in the Lincoln County Cattle War still alive? When did Mrs. McSween die?—D.C. (Conn.).

A.—I believe not. Correction in future issue if I find there are any still living. In 1950 a pleasant old gent named O. L. Roberts of Hico, Texas, made quite a stir by claiming to be Billy the Kid in person and that the man Pat Garrett killed at Ft. Sumner was some other cowpoke, but he didn't get very far with it. Roberts died in December, 1950. Mrs. McSween, who had married again, died within the past ten years, but I cannot recall the exact date.

—*S. Omar Barker.*

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ART
- ☐ Cartooning
- ☐ Commercial Art
- ☐ Fashion Illustrating
- ☐ Magazine Illustrating
- ☐ Show Card and Sign Lettering
- ☐ Sketching and Painting

AUTOMOTIVE
- ☐ Auto Body Rebuilding
- ☐ Auto Elec. Technician
- ☐ Auto-Engine Tune Up
- ☐ Automobile

AVIATION
- ☐ Aeronautical Engineering Jr.
- ☐ Aircraft & Engine Mechanic

BUSINESS
- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Bookkeeping and Accounting
- ☐ Business Administration
- ☐ Business Correspondence
- ☐ Public Accounting
- ☐ Creative Salesmanship
- ☐ Federal Tax
- ☐ Letter-writing Improvement
- ☐ Office Management
- ☐ Professional Secretary
- ☐ Retail Business Management
- ☐ Sales Management
- ☐ Stenographic-Secretarial
- ☐ Traffic Management

CHEMISTRY
- ☐ Analytical Chemistry
- ☐ Chemical Engineering
- ☐ Chem. Lab. Technician
- ☐ General Chemistry
- ☐ Natural Gas Prod. & Trans.
- ☐ Petroleum Engineering
- ☐ Plastics
- ☐ Pulp and Paper Making

CIVIL, STRUCTURAL ENGINEERING
- ☐ Civil Engineering
- ☐ Construction Engineering
- ☐ Highway Engineering
- ☐ Reading Struct. Blueprints
- ☑ Sanitary Engineering
- ☐ Structural Engineering
- ☐ Surveying and Mapping

DRAFTING
- ☐ Aircraft Drafting
- ☐ Architectural Drafting
- ☐ Electrical Drafting
- ☐ Mechanical Drafting
- ☐ Mine Surveying and Mapping
- ☐ Plumbing Drawing and Estimating
- ☐ Structural Drafting

ELECTRICAL
- ☐ Electrical Engineering
- ☐ Electrical Maintenance
- ☐ Electrician ☐ Contracting
- ☐ Lineman

HIGH SCHOOL
- ☐ Commercial ☐ Good English
- ☐ High School Subjects
- ☐ Mathematics

LEADERSHIP
- ☐ Foremanship
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Leadership and Organization
- ☐ Personnel-Labor Relations

MECHANICAL AND SHOP
- ☐ Gas—Electric Welding
- ☐ Heat Treatment ☐ Metallurgy
- ☐ Industrial Engineering
- ☐ Industrial Instrumentation
- ☐ Industrial Supervision
- ☐ Internal Combustion Engines
- ☐ Machine Design-Drafting
- ☐ Machine Shop Inspection
- ☐ Machine Shop Practice
- ☐ Mechanical Engineering
- ☐ Quality Control
- ☐ Reading Shop Blueprints
- ☐ Refrigeration
- ☐ Sheet Metal Worker
- ☐ Tool Design ☐ Toolmaking

RADIO, TELEVISION
- ☐ Industrial Electronics
- ☐ Practical Radio TV Eng'r'ng
- ☐ Radio and TV Servicing
- ☐ Radio Operating
- ☐ Television Technician

RAILROAD
- ☐ Air Brakes ☐ Car Inspector
- ☐ Diesel Locomotive
- ☐ Locomotive Engineer
- ☐ Section Foreman

STEAM AND DIESEL POWER
- ☐ Combustion Engineering
- ☐ Diesel—Elec. ☐ Diesel Eng's
- ☐ Electric Light and Power
- ☐ Stationary Fireman
- ☐ Stationary Steam Engineering

TEXTILE
- ☐ Carding and Spinning
- ☐ Cotton, Rayon, Woolen Mfg.
- ☐ Finishing and Dyeing
- ☐ Loom Fixi'g ☐ Textile Des'ing
- ☐ Textile Eng'r'g ☐ Throwing
- ☐ Warping and Weaving

MISCELLANEOUS
- ☐ Domestic Refrigeration
- ☐ Marine Engineering
- ☐ Ocean Navigation
- ☐ Professional Engineering
- ☐ Short Story Writing
- ☐ Telephony

Name_____ Age_____ Home Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____ Working Hours_____ A.M. to P.M._____

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